

Starting Today You Are the Demon King volume 1: Starting MA-gical Self-Employment From Today!

Takabayashi Tomo



Prologue

今日から
マのつく自由業!



Do you know, Yuu-chan, where your name comes from?

Mama was in a real bind at a street corner in Boston, thinking: Oh no! What am I going to do? Am I going to give birth right here?—that was when this super-cool fencer, who was kind enough to share his taxi with me, said to comfort me: 'A child born weathering the summer grows up strong, so those born in July are blessed. In my hometown, July is called Yuuri,' and his smile was so refreshing and sweet that it just stuck with me. So your name doesn't have anything to do with interest rates or investment rates because your papa is a banker and only thinks about interest and profit like you're always complaining ^[1]—of course I couldn't name you anything like that!

See, Yuu-chan? You were born in July, so that's why you're Yuuri. Don't you think it's adorable? Can't you feel all of Mama's love for you? Yuuri, born in July— isn't it lovely? Don't you think it's a little like the sort of dreamy beauty you find in a girls' manga? Yuuri. Aaah, it's so wonderful, I feel all sparkly.

[1] The 'ri' in interest rate (riritsu), investment rate (rimawari), interest (rishi), and profit (risoku) are the same character: 利, which is also the 'ri' in Yuuri's name.

Chapter 1

Then why did you have to choose *these* Chinese characters?

I've been teased so many times about my name since being on the 'disadvantageous' side of two-against-one scuffles against some punk Yankees in junior high that I've gotten used to fending it off.

"Say something, Shibuya Yuuri!"

"Then is Harajuku ""dis""advantageous?!" [1]

I've heard that tired cliché fifty thousand times. Incidentally, that's in fifteen years of existence.

Yup, my name's Shibuya Yuuri. Not the characters for 'fertile country' or 'gentle pear tree' or 'enduring lapis lazuli', but Shibuya 'Advantageous'. My brother, who's five years older, is Shibuya Shouri. His name's written with the characters for 'victory' and read 'Shouri' (it looks it might be read 'Katsutoshi', but it's not).

As I was flying down the road on my bike, coming home from my new prefectural school, surrounded by the luxuriant new leaves of May—that's when it happened.

I've always wanted to be like that person, so I joined the baseball club in junior-high, but there was someone else who became my aspiration too starting from senior-high, so I was talking about if I'd join the Kendo Club or something with a biking friend I'd just made. Five minutes after we went our separate ways, I was pedaling hard in great spirits when I came across a sight in the quiet park near my house that I couldn't just let pass by.

Money-collection.

That's what they call it, but in actuality they're just goons in the age-old business of exhorting money. Today of all days, the whole lot of them—two goons and one victim—are from my sa-junior (the same junior-high?). Glasses-kun, cornered with his back to the rear restroom wall, is Murata Ken, who was in my class in my second and third years of junior-high.

Yeeeah, whatever, I'm on a bike, so if I just slip past them. I can zooooom on by—it's not like Murata Ken knows who I am, anyway. We're not friends or anything, and we've barely ever even said two words to each other. Well, sure, I act like an advocate of justice and stuff, but nobody's looking at me hopefully or gratefully or anything...aaaaaaargh...

I slowly stop the bicycle.

Aaaaah, dammit...my eyes meet Murata Ken's.

"...What're you guys doing over there? Not committing some crime together, are you?"

And so I, Shibuya Yuuri, face off with two Yankees and get to hear for the around fifty-

thousandth time: "Then is Harajuku "'dis"'advantageous?!" Thanks to that middle class sense of justice I was born with, thanks to that sense of honor that says two against one is unfair.

"You've probably got your wires crossed somewhere—we were just doing some 'money-collection'. Just lawfully collecting some of those notes from his wallet, ya know?"

Get a map and tell me where in the world that's lawful.

The senior-high students, looking like they've lost all nationality in their navy-and-gray uniforms and matching blond hair and colored contacts, drive a kick into my stomach and shove me against a rough mortar wall.

"But because you had to go and stick your nose where it don't belong, our little duck's run off. Eeeh? You're the son of a banker, so you gotta know how important customers are, don'tcha?!"

It's true. Wait, what the heck! Murata Ken, who I was going to save, just turned his back on me and ran off at full speed. But anyhow, I've been told I'm cute, so. I look around for backup, but at 4:30 in the afternoon, no one's around the park but elementary school kids.

"So why'd you come save him, anyway? You guys friends or something? Or are you secretly kissy-kissy with each other?"

"Shut up! I just like the name 'Ken'. 'Kin' and 'Ken' are at the top of my favorite names list."

The name of the teacher I secretly revere is 'Kin', and my favorite historical films actor is 'Matsudaira Ken'.

"Haaaah? Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi's favorite names?"

They start snickering. I draw back fist and knee to pay them back in style, but Yankee A grabs hold of my hair and drags me into the dim restroom.

"Hey, wait...you bastards...! This is the women's bathroom! The sign's right there! Are you blind or what?"

"Oh, is that right? Huuuh, well, whatever. There're more stalls in here anyway—we'll need our privacy, won't we?"

"That's right, there're more stalls. Secrets should be kept secret, right?" Yankee B chirps back, right in tune, and digs into my school bag for my wallet. The blue strap of my cell phone snaps, and the phone tumbles out. It hits the wall, and the ringtone sounds.

"...what is this ring, you ever heard it before?"

"Huh. Aaah, what the hell *is* this? I totally feel like I've heard it somewhere—argh, I can't remember! It must be, you know, from TV. A historical drama or something?"

"What, there're guys who use ringtones from historical dramas other than Mito Koumon these days? And that strap, that's from pro baseball, ain't it? I don't believe this, Shibuya Yuuri, what's going on, Shibuya Yuuri?"

"Shut UP! Like you guys would know anything about the merits of baseball! Hey, stop that,

you bastard...!"

Yankee B digs out the bills. A pair of Souseki-sensei's. [2]

"Whaaaat the heeeell?! No way, you really a banker's son or what?! Or is your old man a tight-fisted miser who don't lend you any money?—thought you'd be carrying more, no-credit Shibuya-chan."

"My dad's job doesn't have anything to do with me!"

Not that I'd tell them this, but most of my money's in 500-yen coins. I keep getting change, but they're mostly useless for vending machines, and they pile up in the blink of an eye.

"Daaaaamn, and here I thought we'd get the bank to pay for Murata, but his account credit limit's at only two blue bills. 20,000's the absolute minimum—20,000, ya hear?"

The grip on my hair suddenly tightens. There are three light-blue doors in the hijacked girls' restroom. I'm dragged into the middle one, and a hard kick to my back sends me to my knees. In front of my eyes, rather unusual for a park's restroom: a brand-name foreign-style sit-down toilet.

"Hey, you're not going to...come on, guys, you're not thugs from the 1990s, so..."

"For someone who passed the prefectural exams, it don't look like your head's working too well, so we gotta give you some references for the future, right?"

No way, they're not really planning to shove my head into the toilet bowl or anything, are they? No matter how goon-like they were in junior-high, this is the twenty-first century! That sort of bullying is totally retro, right?!

"We're gonna kill you if you mess with us. Next time it'll be for real."

As I feared, the enemy forces my head into the Western-style toilet. I guess retro is making a come-back.



I try to hold my head up, but I have about ten seconds to steel myself.

But what is a Western toilet, anyway! If I imagine it as a somewhat strange wash basin—the function is the same. My chin touches the water and I reflexively try to lift it, but the pressure against the back of my head doesn't let up at all. I give up, take a deep breath, and brace myself.

Nobody's ever been flushed down a modern toilet before—I mean, they'd make the Guinness Book of Records if they did. So in other words, if I just close my eyes and hold my breath for a few dozen seconds, no matter how hard I'm pushed or how hard the top of my head is pulled...huh?

Yankee A or Yankee B's hand is still holding me down. But something else is trying to suck me in: a strong force from the center of the toilet's black hole!

There's no way, right?! Do brand-name toiletry have such hidden powers?! So the ultimate secret behind their awesome strength is that they have vacuum cleaners inside! I can't hold on any longer, and as my head, shoulders, and back are sucked painfully inside, I, Shibuya Yuuri, let out a scream, while thinking:

Am I going to be the first in history?

The first guy in history to be flushed down a toilet—?!

Papaaa.

What is it, Yuuri?

Why do you only take me on the 'Star Tours' when we go to Disneyland?

Oh, do you not like the Star Tours, Yuuri?

No, I love it! But I've ridden it so many times now that I remember everything the 'pilot droid' says!

Yuuri, you're amazing! So you've memorized all of the pilot droid's lines? Then, Yuuri, let's take the Star Tours ride one more time to see whether or not you're right! When you're all grown up it'll definitely come in handy one day.

It's certainly come in handy!

After all these years, I thank my dad for that while I hold onto my hazy vision as it begins to return. He probably couldn't have predicted more than ten years ago that his son would be flushed down a toilet, but taking the Star Tours ride ten times in rapid succession at the Tokyo Disneyland has certainly turned out to be useful.

After being sucked into the swirling current, everything was the same as the scene I saw repeatedly as a kid. The droid's shout, and then the warp. The grainy light of the stars stretch and distort into long glowing tails, then become stars again. My body also stretches and distorts, then...

...Or not.

I can't really have been flushed down the toilet, can I? I mean, my body's maturing quite normally, and I have the average physique of a first-year senior high school student.

I stretch out my arms and legs as far as I can, and lie spread-eagled on the dusty ground. It's been a long time since I've seen an unpaved road. There's nothing but the cloudless blue sky above me. The atmosphere seems unfamiliar with concepts like pollution or depletion of the ozone layer; it's pure and clean beneath a clear blue sky. When I tilt my head, I can see green on both sides of the road. On my left is a luxuriant forest, on my right a sloping meadow and somebody's house. The house appears to be made of stone, and in the distance I can vaguely see some sort of animal. A goat?...or a sheep?

I'm probably here because I was with that lot, and I stopped moving after they thrust my face into the toilet bowl, and then they panicked and immediately scurried to abandon me somewhere where I wouldn't be found.

So where is this, anyway? The scenery is like something that wouldn't be found in modern Japan, and I mutter as I sit up, "...The Alps?"

From *Heidi*? Though I can't figure out how I would've been transported here.

My moist school uniform clings disgustingly to my body. If I think about it carefully, the moisture probably came from that public lavatory...I need to stop thinking about it carefully. Water is water, just simple H₂O.

A young woman carrying a large basket comes walking down the road. The wicker basket hanging from her hands falls from both at the same time. Huge fruits—apples?—thump onto the road and start rolling down the hill.

"Excuse me..." I start to say, and gulp. The woman is staring at me. I stare back at her. What I'm thinking is—

She's one of those people who dresses up in costumes (cosplayer for short).

What is with that skirt that's so long that it drags on the ground? And that old-fashioned kercher tied beneath her chin? And those blue eyes and dark gold hair?...is she a foreigner?! Why is there a foreigner wearing Heidi of the Alps' long apron climbing up the hill with a basket? And why has she started yelling with her basket lying where it fell at her feet, pointing at me?

"Ah, um, excuse me, I'm really sorry if I scared you. It's just that I was abandoned here—I really have no intention of causing any harm or being violent or anything like that..."

Maybe her voice is substitute for a siren?—one after another, people fly out of fairy-tale stone houses and come rushing up the slope. There are men and women and children. But they're all—

"...Uh, they're *all* cosplayers?"

No, that's not right, these people are certainly not modern Japanese. To begin with, all of them are foreigners. Speaking from a Japanese perspective, we can't think of these people born with gold or brown hair, with blue eyes and split chins as anything but another race. An army of ten or more of them, carrying handy farming tools like spades and hoes and sickles, gather around us: the woman who's still screaming, me with my legs about to give way.

"Wait a minute, really, please hold on! I was just dumped here! Uuum, how do I say this plausibly, uuuuh...abandoned! I was just abandoned here! Oh!...Oh, I know! I get it now...yeah, I mean."

My brain and tongue are going full steam ahead in my state of emergency. Houses and a group of foreign cosplayers that don't look like they're from Japan. Everything clicks in my head.

"This is a theme park, right?!"

That's right. Foreign cosplayer group, foreign-style houses: this can't be anything but one of the theme parks used so often in those two-hour suspense dramas.

"Hahah, right, that's it, right? I'm so stupid for not realizing it earlier. I've been dumped in a theme park. But then where is this? From the looks of it, maybe the Russian Village in Niigata? Although that'd mean that they went pretty far when they dumped me, huh?...Wa, OW, uh, what was that, Russian Village people—wait, why are you throwing rocks and stuff at—ouch!"

All the foreigners working at theme parks should have been informed of the stupidity of Japanese people. But then why are they throwing rocks at me as I'm frantically trying to explain? Even though I guess I got in without buying a ticket, preparing to use rocks and farm tools (also utilizable as dangerous weapons) against me is going a bit overboard, isn't it?

"Ah, um, my wallet was taken earlier, so I came in without paying for a ticket, but I definitely

will another day. Or if you let me make a local phone call..."

Local?

Warding myself against stones and mud with my hands, I turn my back towards a farmer who thrusts a spade that looks like a gigantic fork at me and wonder as I stare dumbfounded at a frightened baby who's burst into tears,

How much longer is it going to remain light? Wasn't it already past four in the afternoon when I started at it with those Yankees? I supposed it's not unimaginable that I was unconscious for fifteen hours, but that no one found me, not even the theme park's security personnel? And besides, my uniform is still completely soaked even though it's May. What in the world happened to me?! My head is so full of question marks that it's about to hit the ground from the weight. Even though they're throwing rocks at me completely without reason, nobody's coming to my aid.

I hear a powerful commanding voice and abruptly lift my head. Thankfully, the rocks stop.

"Who..." I start to ask, and choke as I see the man on the horse. His clothes are of the same design as the villagers, but from their sleek texture of obviously higher quality. The man climbs down from his high-strung horse and takes two steps towards me.

Football player—this guy's definitely an American football player. He's got the biceps and the chest. And the dazzling blond hair and turquoise-blue eyes, a prominent aquiline nose that's a bit crooked to the left, and the slightly split chin which is the prototype of the classic macho Caucasian. If there were any Japanese girls around here who like foreigners, they'd be lining up to ask to take his picture, and the older ladies would be sticking rolls of money into his bikini pants—he's that good-looking. His only defect are those gigantic triangular nostrils also peculiar to Caucasians.

I secretly decide to name him Denver Broncos, since that's the only NFL team I know. He has a word or two with the villagers, and then kneels and peers at me.

"...Um...thanks so much for calming everyone down..."

A gigantic hand that matches his build firmly seizes my head.

He could probably do a 90-yard long pass with that grip. Or even a touchdown. But my frontal lobe (no way?) doesn't get hurled; he doesn't move for a few seconds, and his fingers tighten around my head.

"Ow..." I moan involuntarily in a small voice as pain assails me from five different points. But it's probably the shock more than the pain, like the shock and dismay of stabling your own fingers by mistake coming before the pain. And the man lets go, while at the same time a sound pours into me. The path from my ears to my brain blazes with agony as if water is running through it.

Wind, trees, the cries of animals, the animal-like wails of a baby—and then words.

Suddenly everyone starts speaking in Japanese. What, so everyone knew Japanese after all? Well, yes, of course, coming to Japan on their own (though I guess they brought their families) to work with tourists, they would have needed to master everyday Japanese, right? Then why did they only talk in Russian (?) until now? Sheesh, tough customers, aren't they? The handsome macho grins broadly.

"Well? Can you understand me now?"

"Aaah, I guess it really does feel kinda strange to hear fluent Japanese coming out of a foreigner."

Now that we can communicate with each other, I feel the tension drain out of me a bit. For now, I need to figure out what the heck is going on. I ask in a pseudo-foreign accent to help them understand me more easily, "So you see, I don't even know myself how I got tossed out here, so I have no idea where or what time...oh, right, I have a watch, so I know what time it is, but...uuuum...excusie-meee, where-ah I am? How I go home from here-ah?"

"What the?" Denver Broncos (or maybe American Football Guy) looks down at me, hands on his hips. "Here I was thinking you looked promising, but did we get a simple idiot for the Maou this time?"

Idiot?

"...How can you call a sensitive young man an idiot the first time you meet him?"

My bad habit rears its head. I've had it since elementary school: when my brain ceases to function, a red light starts flashing, and I start talking frantically. It must be that I'm trying to give myself time to think while I'm chattering away like mad—my fourth grade music teacher was quite impressed. She gave me the nickname 'Turkischer Marsch'. She was the only one to ever call me that.

"Well, sure, I'm enrolled in a medium-ranking prefectural school, and nobody's jealous of my grades or anything. I mean, I am a returnee, after all—I lived in Boston for half a year after I was born. So what's with this 'idiot' stuff all of a sudden? Come on, idiot? Despite how I look, my dad's an elite banker, and my brother's at Hitotsubashi after passing his exams on his first try."

I'm boasting about my family to cover up for my own mediocrity.

"Incidentally, my mom graduated from Ferris!"

"Fe...what? Is that some provincial aristocrat?" he responds, and I stop short. I guess bragging about academic history isn't really globally effective.

"So..."

So theme park actors should stop calling their guests idiots. For those in service roles, customers are gods. I somehow climb to my feet to lecture on that point of Japanese-style management.

The people playing villagers shout astoundingly, "The Mazoku is standing up!"

"He's clad in black a real Mazoku he's gotten up hurry up and get the children inside!"

"Oh no oh no he's going to burn down this town just like Kentenow twenty years ago!"

"Wait a minute this one's still young and he's unarmed look he's got black hair and black eyes I hear that if you catch someone with the twin black you can get the power of

immortality and one of the western dukedoms is offering a reward for one!"

"Yeah I heard that too that there is a head that can fetch a small island."

"Be careful no matter how young he is he's still Mazoku and he'll be able to use majutsu."

"Oh but this is Lord Adalbert Lord Adalbert is here Lord Adalbert please protect this village please use your godly powers to seal this Mazoku and keep us from harm!"

What in heck are these people saying?! I can't even figure out where the punctuations go in their sentences; it sounds like Japanese, but my brain can't parse it. I unconsciously check my right wrist again. My solid, ungainly G-Shock watch is still there. I don't know if it's actually working or not, but at least it'll give me a bit of boost to my attack power? Wait a minute—attack? Wait, what the heck am I thinking here? But however I look at it, these people are hostile towards me, and I have the right to protect myself from anyone. This is a state of emergency—wait, no, it's an urgent evacuation. Or is it legitimate self-defense? Complete panic mode!

The villagers set up their dangerous weapons and sidle towards me with a do-or-die look on their faces. The guy they call Adalbert doesn't hold any farm tools or rocks. Instead, he's wearing a long sword at his side. You could say he's a guy with a high attack power.

"Hey hey, calm down, everyone. He doesn't understand anything yet. If we use this chance to explain to him..."

I can hear some sort of rhythmic sound approaching from a distance behind me. The pounding, which grows louder very rapidly, throws everyone into confusion. The sound is familiar—like hoofs: several horses galloping along the ground, their mighty hoof beats like the earth rumbling.

"Yuuri!"

Someone calls my name, and I turn.

The knight on the white horse who's come to save me...

"...Ske...!"

It's quite understandable that seeing them, my impressions would end at "ske." The three riders galloping towards me aren't knights, and they aren't riding white horses—and just a little above them in the sky, something utterly impossible is approaching. 'Something' there is flying towards me. Something which I've never seen or even imagined in my fifteen years and nine months of existence.

It's a model skeleton, worn a light brown from age, with what looks like wings made from bamboo frames glued with oiled paper sprouting out of it. And yet it's flapping those wings noisily, flying through the sky as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

So skeletons can fly if you attach wings to them?

Wonderful, wonderful, exquisitely done! I can't see any of the wires or hover mechanisms or propellers they're using to keep it afloat. I wonder how they made it.

"Get away from him, Adalbert!"

The three horses galloping towards us are liver chestnuts with black on their foreheads, and riding on them are men holding drawn swords who look like soldiers. 'Liver chestnut' is a JRA term, so the residents probably wouldn't understand it. I can't see the face of the young man who appears to be the leader, but he commands the other two sternly, "Don't use your swords against the inhabitants! They're not soldiers!"

"But, Your Excellency!"

"Disperse the crowd!"

The three horses force their way through the crowd of people who are playing the part of villagers, neighing and rearing. I cover my mouth against the considerable cloud of dust and cough wretchedly, violently. Blue and orange sparks flash within the beige-colored cloud, followed by the heavy *klunk* of metal clashing against metal. The group runs around trying to escape in a chaos of screams and the rustle of grass.

Someone grasps my arms. The surrounding scene gradually recedes.

"Adalbert von Grantz! Why are you encroaching upon our borders?!"

"You're the same as ever, Lord Weller, Mr. Hero-Among-Cowards!"

Oh, I get it. It's like in one of those Sengoku-era battles, where etiquette says you have to announce you're this-and-that and you've fought a hundred men and won a thousand battles before you fight? —That's what I'm thinking, when my body is slowly lifted from the ground. On the slope where the dust has cleared away, the villagers, chased by the cavalry, are running for their homes, and the young man has leapt off his horse and crossed swords with Amer-Foot-Guy. As I'm thinking that the ground has gotten rather far away, I'm abruptly turned and carried away. My arms, which are bearing my full body weight, are ablaze with pain.

"Why am I flying...no way?!"

The elaborate model skeleton whose construction I can't figure out is transporting me away with both of my arms in its grasp. It's flying unsteadily forward with its brown oiled-paper-like wings beating laboriously. No matter how much I look at it, it still looks like a skeleton with wings attached. Even though I'm looking up at it from directly underneath, I can only see an expressionless jaw and cranium attached to the top of its spine, and its eye sockets are dark, hollow cavities.

"Um, er, I guess, thanks."

Though I've been abducted, it's putting so much effort into it that I thought I should at least say thanks. The wings of the aerial model skeleton are desperately beating to keep us afloat, and one false move would probably send us plunging to the ground. Adalbert glances at us in the midst of his sword fight with Lord Weller, the apparent leader of the soldiers, and calls out, "You come well-prepared, using the Kotsuhizoku to carry him away!"

"They are loyal to us. They do not lose themselves over personal grudges."

"And you, Lord Weller? Woah there."

I crane my head as I'm being carried away and see the Mr. Universe called Adalbert narrowly leap back to avoid the sword point of Lord Weller, the leader of the soldiers.

"Don't you think it's a waste for your skills to be used by *that* lot?"

"Unfortunately, Adalbert—"

As usual, I can't see anything of Lord Weller but his khaki back and dark brown head. But somehow, I know that for a moment he smiled.

"—my love isn't as single-minded as yours."

His subordinates, having driven all of the villagers off, gallop back, and the two disengage at the same time. Adalbert flies to his horse and yell to me, as I move to about a tree's height:

"Be patient for a bit—I'll come to save you soon!"

"Save me...?—I don't even know if I'm being kidnapped by the good guys or the bad guys right now!"

Below me, the brown-haired leader stop his soldiers, who are about to chase after the enemy.

"Leave him!"

"He's one man. He's at a disadvantage right now, and we'll probably be able to take him if we can catch up with him."

Lord Weller (face still unknown), snaps an answer in reply. He's so cool!

"Our top priority right now is to get His Majesty to safety!"

This His Majesty that they need to get to safety—could they be talk about super-kabuki me? I guess I'm now participating in the production of this ultra-elaborate attraction of this ultra-novel theme park in the role of His Majesty; I surreptitiously murmur, "...For now, could you maybe get me down from this ultra-well-made sky ride?"

footnotes

[1] Yuuri's last name, Shibuya, is also the name of a district and railway station in Tokyo. Harajuku is the name of an adjacent district and railway station.

[2] Equivalent to a bit less than \$20 USD.

Chapter 2

"Your Majesty!" the man says.

He has long, thick gray hair, lilac-colored eyes, and a body that's nine times the size of his head at its full height.

Since I'm unable to climb off the horse by myself, I'm left hanging onto its behind, at a loss

for a reply. How should I answer someone who calls me Your Majesty? And an ultra-beautiful 30s-something man in his prime at that!

It's not due to a lack of vocabulary or to the fact that my CPU is cycling particularly slowly that I can't accurately describe his beauty. The surroundings of an average senior high student just don't usually contain such beauty, to say nothing of someone like the man standing in front of me, who isn't even Japanese.

After half a day of a grueling ride clinging to Lord Weller's back—my first time on horseback—we have finally arrived at a village with wooden buildings, smaller than the one from earlier. It has around fifteen houses, and looks more like a neighborhood association than a village. One after another, armed soldiers return from all directions to the forest entrance a small distance away. Terrifyingly, each of the parties comes with its own "flying!model skeleton." Maybe they're this theme park's mascot characters? If so, it's in extremely bad taste—wait, no, it's a novel concept.

We cut across the center of the village and came to a largish (four rooms or so) house some ways away from the soldiers. As we reached the area in front of it, the door burst open, and *he* came flying out.

I give up trying to speak as soon as I see his face. It's that beautiful: I mean, really beautiful, super-beautiful, ultra fully beaut—um, beautiful. I can't say that it's a noble face that exudes sagacity or anything. He's a beautiful person who looks really intelligent! Though there's a rather vapid expression on his face.

Even his voice is beautiful—a resonant baritone. That Adalbert from earlier was pretty handsome too, but this person is so perfect that he would make girls swoon on sight. And it's not just girls in their late twenties who would faint—mature and old...no, all ladies would.

"Conrart, hurry and give His Majesty a hand..."

"Yes, yes. Your Majesty, if you lean this way, yes, please climb down slowly—that's it, steady now."

Lord Weller's first name appears to be Conrart. Finally liberated from the horse, my feet reach level ground. I still feel like I'm swaying up and down.

"Oh, Your Majesty, I am so glad you're safe! I, von Kleist, have been anxiously awaiting the day that I would at last be able to meet you," he says dramatically, and drops to the ground on one knee. I take a startled step back and hiss in pain as the sudden movement aggravates the ache in my buttocks. The beautiful person's face changes color.

"Your Majesty, are you injured anywhere?! Conrart! You were with him, weren't you?"

"Your butt hurts, doesn't it, Your Majesty. Since this is your first time on horseback. Right?" he asks, and I'm bewildered by his grin. But the beautiful person, who's apparently called von Kleist, doesn't leave it at that.



"The first time?! Is training in horseback riding no longer a part of the elementary curriculum? Why did the Shinou choose such a world for..."

"This is not the place for that, Günter. Von Grantz got there before us."

"Adalbert! Your Majesty, did they do anything to you?!"

"...They threw rocks and came at me with hoes and spades, but..."

"How terrible! Those humans...but, Your Majesty, how is it that you can speak..."

He probably wants to ask how I can understand them. I wave my right hand limply and try not to smile.

"Well, but everyone speaks Japanese so well. It's too modest of you to worry about whether or not I understand you. I'm surprised at how fluent everyone is. It's amazing—bravo, viva the actors' soul. How long have you been in Japan? What country are you from?"

Günter (name) von Kleist (surname) looks dubious.

"I come from...this country."

"You were born in Japan?!"

That's when Lord Weller says something totally shocking.

"Your Majesty, this is not Japan."

"Oh—there, see? I knew you couldn't have been born in Japan. Because this is...uh."

Huh?

This isn't Japan?

Did he just say that this isn't Japan?

"Then why is everyone speaking Japanese?"

"We're not."

That's when I first take a good look at Lord Weller. He appears to be about nineteen or twenty, and his clothes, unlike that of the villagers, are primarily functional. His khaki-colored belt and leather boots—maybe influenced by TV or movies—look like they're part of some country's military uniform.

He has rather short dark brown hair and light brown eyes with scattered flecks of silver. There are traces of an old scar across his eyebrows, as well as evidence of old injuries on his fingers and the backs of his hands. He places those hands on my shoulders and gazes deliberately down at me.

"This is not Japan, Yuuri. This isn't even the world in which you were born and raised."

As he's informing me of that unbelievable fact, I'm thinking in the back of my mind—aaah, I understand this person. If I were to tell someone about him, I would definitely be able to do it pretty well.

Lord Conrart Weller would be the type of person who would strike an unconsciously heroic pose in the center court at Wimbledon and receive a standing ovation from the audience. But not because of his face. Compared to Günter and Adalbert, he's rather plain; if he were a Hollywood actor, he'd probably be just one among many in supporting roles. But his expression belongs to someone for whom life is the culmination of having lived every moment until this one: not as a beloved of God or an artist's construct, but rather one who has lived his life his own way.

That's what he's like, Conrad. I think that's how I would describe him to someone.

"Conrad...I mean, um, Conrart..."

"Hmm? Oh, since you're used to hearing English, Conrad is probably easier for you to pronounce. I have some friends who call me that, too."

"Have I met you somewhere before?"

Conrad thinks for a moment, then shakes his head.

"No."

The beautiful senior with the long gray hair and lilac eyes forces his way in between us.

"In any case, Your Majesty, this is not the place to talk. Please excuse the shabbiness and step inside," Günter says disparagingly of this house which isn't even his, and pushes me inside. I involuntarily turn, and glimpse what are probably the inhabitants of this village peering at us through the cloudy windows of their modest timber homes.

I'm still wearing my moist school uniform, so I'm grateful for the warmth of the room and the fire in the wood-stove. Just a few hours earlier I was in Japan in May, but where am I now? And what month is it?! The light of the setting sun shines through the dirty windows, but I don't even know anymore if they're facing east or west.

If I were at home in Japan with these half-damp clothes on after being immersed in the park toilet, I would've stepped into the bath immediately.

I take off the disgustingly moist jacket and spread it out near the fire. That act arouses deep emotion in Günter.

"Your Majesty, do you wear black every day? It's magnificent, it suits you wonderfully! Only the king and his close relations wear black on a daily basis. That noble black hair, those black eyes—you are without question our Majesty!"

"...But this is just my school uniform...and besides, most Japanese are born with black hair and eyes..."

Though everyone's skin changes color as they grow older. The dark-tanned Matsuzaki Shigeru look was popular until just recently. As for me, my hair's finally grown out a bit after being on the baseball team until mid-third year of junior high. I was thinking about cutting it once summer vacation comes around.

"School uniform? So that jacket is called a school uniform? I see, it must be made by highly-skilled craftsmen especially for Your Majesty."

Actually, they're mass-produced in factories and customarily worn by junior and senior high school boys all over Japan. And besides, since I'll be wearing this jacket for three years, it's still a bit big for my current size.

"Your Majesty, you may find it a bit cold, but it's already spring in this country," Conrad says, and takes up position next to the door. Maybe he's been assigned watch-duty—with his sword at his side, he folds his arms and leans his head back against the wall. His eyes slowly slide shut.

As a last resort I shift my chair as close to the fire as I can. There's a table of the kind of rough rustic workmanship that you would only see in a folk craft shop in the mountain recesses. Instead of the usual electric light that should be hanging from the ceiling, there's a flickering lamp of the mountain-hut variety.

"...You even created the season!—such attention to detail! What an elaborate attraction this is..."

"This is not an attraction," Conrad, still with his eyes closed, corrects me.

"But how am I supposed to believe it if you just tell me out of the blue like that! Here's what I'm guessing—one: that this is a really expensive and elaborate theme park attraction; two: that it's one of those candid camera shows you keep seeing on TV; three: that I'm dreaming—it must be one of those. There, choose one. I'm hoping for number three."

Conrad makes no response, but Günter in front of me looks a little worried. He turns to me,

muttering terms unfamiliar to him.

"Tea-bee...candid camera...? Please wait a moment, Your Majesty, I'll explain everything to you. So please calm down and stop quizzing me on the vocabulary of your other world?"
Günter takes a seat across from me.

"Okay, I'm calm. Even if you tell me that you're my mother, I'll just clap my hands, laugh, and tell you an American joke."

Günter flings his hands up in defeat. Then he leans forward passionately and begins to speak.

"Then allow me to explain. Your Majesty, your soul should have been born here in this world eighteen years ago. However, because of the chaos following the war of that time, or perhaps because he felt the presence of someone of ill will in our midst targeting you, the Shinou judged that your soul should be sent to another world. Accordingly, we transported your sublime, still-unborn soul to Earth according to the Shinou's instructions. So Your Majesty was born from your current honorable father and mother, and have grown up in that world. But though you should have become an adult in safety in that other world, recent circumstances have dictated that you be called back..."

"Wait a minute, all this polite speech is making my head hurt. Can you talk a bit more directly?"

"Please do not request something so impossible. Your Majesty is Your Majesty, and we are your vassals."

"What's with all this Your Majesty Your Majesty Your Majesty? My name is Yuuri—Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi. Well, that's what I've called myself for a while now. So the story goes like this: I should actually have been born in this world, but for some reason I was born and raised in another world. But because you need me now, you summoned me here from Japan. Have I got it all?"

"Marvelous, that's exactly correct. I am awed by your wisdom."

To my despair, Günter nods deeply with heartfelt delight.

It's Narnia—I mean—right, so it's a familiar story. Actually, it's one of those old plotlines that're so overused in movies as well as anime and manga. Granted, there's a difference in quality between fiction novels and juvenile literature, but it's been recycled umpteen times. There's no originality to it at all. Although people are rarely actually pulled into them. And it's even more exceedingly rare for someone to get to them from a public lavatory.

"So, I traveled through a tunnel connecting to this world from a toilet hole and fell onto that mountain road?"

"That is correct. By our calculations, we should have been able to summon you into our kingdom—into the capital, in fact. However, perhaps we put too much power into it, and you landed on the outskirts of our borders, within the village of the humans. I am very sorry, Your Majesty. I'm very glad that of those we placed along the border to provide against a contingency, Conrart reached you in time. We are now within our own territory, so there is no need for further worry. Please be at ease."

"Be at ease? But you guys aren't exactly comfortable either, are you? Am I really the

person you're looking for? If you look at the population density of Japan, there's a possibility that you've got the wrong person, isn't there? My appearance and brains are both average, and I don't have any weird birthmarks—"

I don't have any special birthmarks that can be used as proof in this situation. If forced, I can only say that I have a faint scar on my left elbow from when I was a kid.

"But um, Günter...san, this burn-like scar on my left elbow was from rubbing against man-made turf while I was playing baseball. I wasn't born with anything that looks like the 'mark of the king'."

My intellectual act starts to break down. To say it nicely, I'm like an actor answering questions about reports of a love affair. To put it baldly, I'm like a pet owner talking about his cat.

"No, I felt strongly that I could not be mistaken about you from the moment I first laid eyes on you, Your Majesty. That sublime, pure-black hair, those clear, unclouded dark eyes, that lovely color with which you were endowed from birth—and what's more, I cannot think that anyone but you would be clad in jet-black clothing."

Guh, he said lovely. That word should be used for someone like you, shouldn't it?

"And besides, you are proficient in our language, which makes it all the more obvious that it is no mistake. What Adalbert did to you...I deeply regret, but...he drew out the language stored deep within Your Majesty's soul. Without exception, all souls have a store of memories from the 'lives' they have lived. Of course, ordinarily the door to those memories is shut, and they are able to use only the knowledge they have learned in their new 'life'. But that man wrenched open the door and forcibly extracted a portion of the sealed memories. What savage, foul, unprincipled human magic!"

I nod timidly in response to that angry explanation.

"...Though I have heard that it can be pretty useful."

"That's outrageous! I'm glad that he was skillful enough to call out only the portion for language, but think of what would have happened if he had revived unnecessary memories! No one wants to know the travels of their own soul."

Though there seem to be a lot of people in Japan who would like to know. From his position to one side of the door, Conrad adds calmly, "But if you think about it, it's because of what he did that we're able to speak to His Majesty like this now. There's no use bursting a vein over what's already done, Lord von Kleist."

"...But I have already prepared the textbooks and rulers to teach His Majesty High Mazoku..."

His tone is full of heartfelt regret, but I'm rather uneasy about the intended use of those rulers. I have no problem if they're for underlining text, of course.

"In any case, the fact that you understand the language of this land is proof that Your Majesty's soul comes from this world. My confidence has become conviction."

"Günter-san...I think I've heard that somewhere..."

I guess they somehow quite firmly believe that I'm their 'Majesty'.

But in this type of scenario, a hero or savior or prince or princess who is the protagonist of the story usually resolves the world's problems and gives the story a happy ending. Even one renowned best-selling author has said that people don't like stories without happy endings.

"All right, I think it's a bit much to expect me to believe all of this, but how about we just leave it at that for now? So let's get this over with. What mission did you summon me here for? Should I go save some princess? Or slay a fire-breathing monster?"

"Fire-breathing monster? You mean dragon?! Certainly not! That species has been hunted to the edge of extinction by humans, and we are desperately trying to protect them."

So dragons are at the top of the endangered species list in this world.

From the wooden door comes the sound of several diffident knocks. Conrad carefully opens it a slight crack, sword in hand. Standing there are some children around ten years of age, looking up at him with wide grins.

"Hey you!"

"Conrad! Teach us to throw—we can't get the ball to go straight at all!"

"Teach us to hit it, too! And then we need to know how to end the game."

Their parents are too afraid of the soldiers to venture outside, but that doesn't seem to be the case for these children. And for them, Conrad isn't Lord Weller or Your Excellency, but simply an older playmate.

"All of you, the sun's going down, and it's going to be pitch dark soon. We won't be able to see anything in a little while."

"You can still see."

"It's still fine!"

He looks worriedly over at me, then bows and leaves the room.

"...He must be a great person if the children like him so much."

"Yes, he is perhaps the best commander in the kingdom. Of all my pupils, he was my pride."

"So you're a teacher, um, von Kleist-san?"

"Please do call me Günter. Yes, of course, I am a teacher, and serve as an advisor and assistant to Your Majesty the King.

"If you're a teacher, then can you tell me in simple terms? Günter, what I am supposed to do here in this world? What sort of evil enemy do I need to defeat before I can go home to Saitama?"

"Humans."

The firewood in the stove splits apart with a crack.

"...Humans...so...that's...which one...?"

"Not which one, Your Majesty. We must annihilate all the humans who are hostile towards our country and burn their countries to cinders. In order to do so, we need a leader—we need Your Majesty's powers as our ruler."

Annihilate humans and burn them to cinders?

Annihilate humans?!

I kick the chair away in my hurry to get away—and failing, land on the floor on my backside. Günter panics and rushes over.

"Are you all right, Your Majesty?"

"Woah, wait a minute! Are you saying that we need to kill humans, Günter-san?! Then you'll have to kill me too! I mean, however you look at it, I'm just an ordinary human being—no, wait, and you guys, your faces look a bit different, but...you're humans too, aren't you?"

"However you look at it, Your Majesty is one of us, one of the Demon Clan, the Mazoku. Even more so, for you are he who must be honored for bearing the noble black! None but the king of the Mazoku or those chosen to be close to him who are born carrying the black. And what's more, both your eyes and hair are black—you are the living bearer of the twin black..."

I have a feeling that there's a sentence in there that I didn't catch.

"The same what as you?"

"Mazoku, the Demon Tribe."

No way.

"...So, what am I supposed to be ruler of?"

"You are His Majesty the Maou, King of the Demons."

"Maou."

Dad, Dad, look, there's a 'Honyara' over there, I'm scared!"

An Achoo!Great 'Honyara'. [1]

Originally the Great 'Honyara' of Yokohama.

Huh, wait, I somehow feel like the Great 'Honyara' of Hama is not the right answer.

What is this 'Honyara' supposed to be, anyway?

Probably the terrible boss of the demons, the one who hunts down and curses and kills human beings?

So then, so what am I supposed to be ruler of again?

"Get ahold of yourself, your Majesty, please calm down! Retain your sanity! You are the one who has become our hope, His Majesty the Twenty-Seventh Maou!"

Oh boy, he really is calling me the Maou. But twenty-seven is a good number, right? 27 is...

My shoulders are seized and shaken back and forth. My consciousness is taking a flight from reality due to the excessive shock. Because this person here is telling me that I have to become a demon and beat humans to a pulp. That's totally impossible, I could never do something like that—why isn't my enemy a slimy evil sorcerer or a devilish dragon or the great demon king or something?—oh wait, I'm supposed to be the demon king, so does that mean I'm on the enemy side in this world?! So then I'm going to be the final boss defeated by the hero or savior in the last dungeon?! Dammit, if that's the way it's going to be, then I'll take the hero on with all I've got so he won't be able to finish the game without pressing reset at least two or three times! He's not going to get past me without being at level 99 if it kills me...oy, it's not going to be *if* it kills me—if I'm the last boss, I'm really going to die! My brain cells are going off at their in-a-pinch machine-gun firing rate—I'm panicking at the enemy's magical attack here!

Aaah, no way, someone tell me it's all a lie!

"It's not a lie, Your Majesty! You truly are the Maou. Congratulations, you are the Maou starting today!"

Congratulations for what?!

Outside, the sky is already half-purple, the remaining half orange.

Only the unsteady, wavering light of lamp-flames escape from the windows of the village houses. From among them come the sounds of frolicking children and dimly, the movement of their smiling faces.

"Your Majesty?"

"Woah! Can you please stop calling me 'Your Majesty'?"

Conrad is leaning against a wall, arms folded. Three steps away is a square piece of wood, and beside it a child of about ten. He's holding a club poised in his hands—they're apparently playing a game somewhere between cricket and baseball; the bat's handle is wrapped with cloth, but is strangely thick, and there are two outfielders behind the pitcher but no catcher at all.

"I don't know much about the rules of cricket, but who comes up after someone hits?"

"That's difficult in a village with only five children."

So there's one more in the outfield. He or she is only a shadow in the twilight.

The pitcher throws something that looks like a ball, but the batter swings dramatically at empty air. The ball rolls to the wall, and Conrad picks it up and throws it back. These are the advanced conditions they're playing under.

"Three strikes and you're out, Howell; switch with first base."

"So you're playing baseball?"

But why is there baseball in this world of sword and magic...? The child in outfield is running towards us.

"Wait, wait! If this is baseball, then why isn't there a catcher? You can take that position, can't you?"

"It'd be unfair for an adult to join in."

"No, no, that's not the problem. So let's see—you playing outfielder, what's your name?"

"Brandon."

He's right at the age when his voice is changing, and it's scratchy and hoarse.

"Then, Brandon, you be the catcher. See, you squat here and catch the ball when it comes. Oh, but you guys don't have a mitt?—what, and no gloves either?!"

"Your Majesty...I mean, Lord Yuuri, this is a village founded by refugees from across the border. So they're not exactly stocked in sports equipment."

The boy shakes off my hand and looks fearfully up at me.

"'Your Majesty'? Conrad, why are you calling him Your Majesty? Who is he?! The scary person that Mom and the others were talking about?"

"Brandon! This is the one who has become the king of our country. Far from being a scary person, he is the gentle person who will protect your village."

Stop telling him something I haven't even thought about.

"King?!"

But the five gathered here...four boys and a girl, kneel where they're standing and cover their faces. There's even a kid who's pressing his head against the ground. It's not gesture of great respect.

"Oh please, Your Majesty! Please don't cut off our heads! Please don't burn down our houses!"

"Howell, none of you have done anything bad, so His Majesty would never do anything like that. Here, Emma, get up now."

"But my dad, because the King..."

The little girl, who appears to be recalling some painful memory, starts to cry. The doors of several houses open, and the mother of each child shouts his or her name. The children all dash off towards their homes.

I pick up the ball lying at my feet. With this light and that pitcher, there would probably be no need for either a mask or a mitt. The ball is a soft round leather bag stuffed with straw and sewed together. Even the person throwing it wouldn't be able to gauge his speed.

"When I was their age, I played baseball until dark, too. And at night I would watch games on TV—I didn't have any time to do homework at all."

"Children are the same in this world as well."

I step on the piece of wood serving as home plate.

"Hey, Conrad."

"Yes."

"Is it true that I'm the king? The great demon king—the great Maou—that would silence even crying children?"

"It's true. Though I don't know about the great part, Your Majesty is genuinely the twenty-seventh ruler of the Kingdom of Shinma."

"Then I'll chop off people's heads too?"

"Not at all! This should be called a village of refugees. It's true that one winter six years ago, all the men of the village were executed in an oppressive act due to a religious misunderstanding. The women and children came to the border seeking asylum, and we lent them this land mostly without taxation on the condition that the agricultural fields would not spread further. They rejected the foolish king of the human kingdom who killed their men and burned down their houses. Although..." Conrad presses his lips together and looks down, chagrined. "...I hope that you will remember that not all humans are like that. Here, Your Majesty, let's go in. When it gets dark the temperature drops pretty sharply. I'll get lectured by Günter again."

Stars begin to appear. The moon is still low in the sky. The light coming through the window is dim and forlorn.

Nothing else illuminates the night. No neon lights or vending machines or computers or street lights.

What kind of place have I found myself in?

"...What kind of a trap have I gotten myself into?"

"But this is your world."

Conrad smiles as he shuts the door. In this twilight devoid of any other major light sources, even the light of the lamp within the room looks like a horizontal search beam.

"Welcome home, Your Majesty."

To this place where your soul should have been born.

Oh, what a difference in the food!

The so-called food that I'm given is leather that even a dog would have a hard time sinking his teeth into, bread so dry you could pound a nail with it even at room temperature, and dried fruits that are somewhat easier on the teeth to lick than chew.

"These are so dry because they're military rations," Günter insists stubbornly, and, face to face with him, I silently practice the policy of chewing thirty times per mouthful. I'm starving, but I can't gulp down the dried meat without first chewing it thoroughly.

Conrad, the military Numero Uno who's so beloved by the children, seems to have been invited to dinner by the family of Brandon or Howell or Emma or one of the children whose names I don't know.

"I want to go too—!"

"You must not. The people of this village are humans. If you eat the things made by humans and your body is harmed, what would we do then?"

"I told you, I'm human, so I should be fine!"

"No! How can you say for sure that no one among them is hatching some nefarious scheme? I, Günter, cannot allow Your Majesty to do that which would put you in danger."

And, oh, what a difference in the beds!

Of course, I believed that I would be sleeping in the best bedroom in this house lent to us by the people of the village. I mean, they're saying that I'm the Maou, so they should at least let my exhausted body luxuriate in a soft and fluffy futon. Though from what I've seen of this world so far, a bed would be more likely than a futon. In any case, Günter replies to my question quite matter-of-factly.

"Why? Hey wait, why am I in a sleeping bag while the soldier that just went into the bedroom gets a fluffy bed? Look, am I really the king or not? And anyway, was this sleeping bag even properly dried in the sun?"

"What would happen if a rebel targeting Your Majesty broke into the bedroom? That soldier earlier is substituting himself in your place. Here an attack cannot come from the window, and this room, with Conrart guarding the door, is secure."

"Your Majesty, you'll be riding all day tomorrow, so please take your ease tonight and shore up your strength."

Telling me to sleep well is great and all, but I'm shut into a dusty, narrow closet that doesn't even have a window, with a brownish cotton-padded sorry excuse for an outdoor sleeping bag spread out for me... The floor is hard, and the camping-use sleeping bag is definitely tough-guy style. To make matters worse, this is my first time sleeping surrounded by Foreign-Manufactured Handsome Guys. Ah, this is what you'd called sleeping sandwiched. The kings in kingmaker games are guaranteed more freedom than this, aren't they?

And the next day, oh, what a difference in modes of transportation!

Five chestnuts, all seemingly full of energy, are led out in front of me as I stand there sleep-deprived. Their vigorous breaths are white in the perfectly clear golden morning air.

"Horses again?!"

Wearing my abused soaked-and-redried school uniform, I reach a timid hand out towards one gigantic animal. I quickly withdraw at its threatening whinny.

"But you're Mazoku, aren't you? Can't you use magic or something?"

"Magic...you mean sorcery—Majutsu?"

"Yeah, yeah, magic. So isn't there something that'll get us to the capital or the castle without having to gallop on horses at reckless speeds? We could use magic to *zoom!* fly there instead!"

Like the Go Anywhere Door or the Bamboo Copter, ^[2] something convenient like that.

Günter force-clears his throat and says, "Your Majesty, Majutsu is not so omnipotent."

"Eeeeh? But in the TV shows I've seen, the witch or wizard can totally disregard science and just wave a wand to make anything they want happen."

"I do not know what kind of play or drama a TV is, but it is very much exaggerated. Majutsu is useful almost exclusively in combat, or only in such extremely important cases as, say, summoning Your Majesty."

So TV is different from reality? I grumble just a bit.

"So to put it simply, energy conservation," Conrad says as he's nuzzled by a horse's muzzle. "But then again, that's not very convincing coming from me, since I have no magical abilities of my own. Now, Your Majesty, will you ride with Günter or me? The riding experience that we asked about yesterday..."

"I've been on a merry-go-round a few times."

"I see, a merry-go-round. In that case we probably wouldn't be able to make it to the capital even in three days, so please ride behind me. It'll be harder on them, but if we take care to switch—well, we should be fine."

"My behind hasn't even stopped hurting from yesterday...hey, how do you know about merry-go-rounds?"

"Well then, please prepare yourself. Your front will probably hurt today, too."

The soldiers in the lead salute them and set out one by one. Looking up, I can see the modded model skeletons in the skies above them just like yesterday. Of course there is one above us too. I guess it really is a mascot character? What should I call it? 'Lil Flying Bones? Mr. Calcium?

"How about Kohy? Heeeey, Kohy, thanks for the lift yesterday! Though I wonder if it's the same one from yesterday? I can't really tell them apart."

I quite capriciously decide on a name for it, then quietly wave. Its jaw clatters, and it flaps its wings repeatedly with great vigour in a horribly grotesque way. I unthinkingly ask my tutor, "Woah, it's mad! Hey, is it mad at me?"

"No, it's simply overcome that Your Majesty is speaking to it. They have no perception of 'individuals', so speaking to one is like speaking to all. The Kotsuhizoku can transmit simple concepts to each other even when they're apart, so they're invaluable for guarding and scouting."

There're some difficult terms in there that I don't really understand, but I guess the basic idea is 'all for one and one for all'.

"Now then, Your Majesty, we should be heading out as well."

Conrad takes up the reins in his right hand and holds out his left to pull me up. The villagers stay out of sight—still frightened, maybe. But the door of a single house opens a slit, and a blond head peeks out.

"Awww!" I shout towards him. "What a waste! If they'd just practice with a heavier, harder ball, they could get a lot better! The bat should be smoother too, with a narrower handle so it's easier to grip, and..."

Of course they have to have a catcher, right?

"In baseball, you have to have a catcher!"

I see the blond grabbed by his mother, and the door shut hastily.

"I visit this village from time to time..." He pulls me up in one smooth motion. "They've had some painful experiences, but they're taking it in stride and living their lives."

"Yeah."

Though I can't even imagine having my father killed and my house burned down.

Günter looks displeased, but pretends otherwise and nudges his horse forward.

So begins my first day in Hell.

According to my brave little analog G-Shock, which continues to carve time into little pieces, we run for six hours without stopping from that morning, and switch horses twice at relay points. After the third relay point, we come to a much larger settlement than the previous one, and the entire troupe tie our horses to the fence outside when Günter signals for a break.

"You seem quite tired, Your Majesty. Everything that you've been muttering for the past while has been incomprehensible."

Since Conrad has been continually encouraging the horse to keep to a run, even I

remember its name now. I tumble off the Siberian hazel filly called Nocanty, begging dazedly, "Help me."

"Of course. Once we've completed the second half of this trip, I'll be at your command."

"No, I meant right now."

"Then for the time being, why don't we replenish your calorie count? In other words, lunch."

Even though I'm now standing on level ground, I feel as if I'm riding in a boat. To make matters worse, it's supposedly only the second month of spring, but the sunlight is enough to make me yearn for my refrigerator.

"I don't have any appetite at all. The nights are cold, the days are hot, and my throat is clogged with dust—oh!"

Presented with the object of my desire, I instinctively reach out for it, then stop in confusion.

It's a misshapen glass bowl that looks like something an amateur glass-blower might make on his first day in class. It's filled to the brim with water that frosts and condensates on the outside of the glass. It's just what I want right now.

"...Ice water..."

"Your Majesty!"

Günter comes over on the double. He's probably going to tell me not to eat or drink anything given to me by a human again. But the girl holding the bowl reverently, who's around ten years old, has violet hair and eyes. She looks like a human in every other way, but...

"You're Mazoku, aren't you?"

The girl nods. "Yes, Your Majesty. We would be happy to give you our last drop if it would help you in some way."

That's fine, isn't it? Since she's Mazoku and I'm king of the Mazoku. I touch the bowl. It's as cold as it looks, almost painfully so. The tutor says, "Your Majesty, please wa..."

The bowl disappears from my hands; when I look up, Conrad, standing next to me, has already brought it up to his mouth. He takes a single mouthful, then returns it to me, briefly murmuring only, "Leave a little bit."

I return the bowl with only a tiny bit of water remaining, and the girl, looking delighted, bows deeply and runs off. The coldness spreads in an instant from my throat to my chest, and for a moment I stagger at the pain from the type of brain freeze you'd get right after eating shaved ice. My head clears, and the greenery around me suddenly seems more vivid.

"...Guess I was really thirsty. Like being dehydrated during Club in midsummer."

"That little girl will certainly be proud for the rest of her life that she was able to give Your Majesty some water," he says with a good-natured smile. But I know this scene from

historical dramas. He just tested that water for poison. For my sake, he tasted it for poison.

My tutor approaches with a shocked look on his face.

"Your Majesty, I tell you this again and again, but please do not consume anything other than what we bring you."

"But this village is completely Mazoku, isn't it? The people who live here—see, Günter?—there're so many people here with your unusual beauty."

"Even so..."

Conrad lifts the saddle from Nocanty and offers her water just like you would to another person. "It didn't have any strange flavors, and I asked him to leave the last mouthful to avoid anything that might be undissolved at the bottom. His Majesty is not a dullard—he just wanted his first cup to be cold. Now he'll be able to tolerate anything, from water from the water bag to transportable food."

"Conrart, you back the commoners too much."

"And so?" Conrad returns calmly. "If we do not back the people of this country, then who will? Ah, of course..."

Nocanty chews his hair. Happily, lovingly...

"I would not only lend His Majesty my shoulders, but I'd give my hands, heart, and life for him."

"...I don't need your heart or life or anything like that."

"Please don't say that."

"Then lend me your Majutsu. I'm already in a state of emergency, right now, so send me *zoom* flying with your Majutsu. I can't take riding a horse any more—I'm sick of riding."

"Majutsu for me is...well. I did tell you that I have no magical powers, right? But for Majutsu-related matters, Günter who is the highest practitioner in the kingdom, can be of assistance to you."

His brows knit. Kyaaaah, Anxious!Günter is super-cool too!

"Your Majesty's magical powers are several times my own. In any case, the generations of Maou have had powers that would instill fear in even the gods."

"Wait, wait. I'm a human, so I don't have Majutsu or spiritual ability or ESP or anything like that."

"Your. Majesty. You. Are. MAZOKU!"

"But I've never been able to see ghosts or win the lottery or see through girls' swimsuits—or even get the planchette to move on a ouija board..."

Confession. When we tried the ouija board after school in fourth grade, I moved the

planchette myself. Nozawa, who was doing it with me, was so scared that he started crying, and I couldn't make myself tell him that it'd been me. Günter, who must have jumped to the wrong conclusion, smiles in admiration.

"I imagine that must be an advanced ritual in the other world? Due to my ignorance, I do not know if it has any connection to Majutsu, but...it's quite all right, Your Majesty. Magical power is intrinsic to the soul. Even if you cannot use it now, over time everything in this world will align themselves to your will."

"I don't really think that'll happen, but—"

Conrad, who apparently doesn't have even a sliver of magic, slowly strokes the muzzle of his beloved horse.

"I've never felt the lack of magic to be an inconvenience. Well, let's leave that question for the long term. For now, it would be rather awkward if Your Majesty cannot ride a horse on your own."

"Me, on my own?!"

Nocanty's head swings violently, and both the remaining water and the water dripping from her nose fly in all directions. Me, ride this?!

"No, of course we wouldn't have you galloping on your first try. Just for your entry into the capital would be fine. You wouldn't want to disappoint your people, right? They are looking for a noble, strong-willed king, so of course it would be better for you to ride on your own and enter the castle in majesty."

"Uwahah...on her??"

"Nooo. We have a special lady prepared especially for Your Majesty—a beloved daughter I helped delivered, and put much effort into training. A pure black horse who matches Your Majesty perfectly."

There goes my dream of being the king on his white horse.

footnotes

[1] Reference to a cartoon series called *Hakushon Dai Maou* (literally "Achoo! Great Demon King", or *The Genie Family* in the US) about an old jar containing a family of three Arabian genies: Hasshoo, the husband, Eppah, his wife and their little daughter, Ya-ahn, who must grant wishes when someone standing nearby happens to sneeze, hiccup, or yawn, respectively.

[2] Secret tools in the 4th dimension pocket of Doraemon, the Helper Robot; the Bamboo Copter allows something to take flight when attached, and the Go Anywhere Door allows someone to go anywhere just by going through the door.

Chapter 3

People bustle busily among lines of countless shops just beginning to come aglow. A gigantic door is opened for us by guards who stand quietly at attention as we pass.

Günter, riding next to me, proclaims, "Welcome home, Your Majesty. Indeed, to this city, the capital of this our kingdom which is yours, founded by the great Shinou and the powerful, wise, and courageous Mazoku who—ah, it must not be forgotten are said to be

the origin of everything in the world—defeated the Souseu and his army to their eternal glory..."

Is that supposed to be the national anthem?

"...you are very much welcome."

—But no, it turns out to be the country's name. "Just abbreviate it Shinma Kingdom," Conrad tells me in a whisper. Right, I'll just remember it that way.

My impressions upon entering the capital are easy to state: "A Huis Ten Bosch on an entirely different scale." The buildings and people all look like they're from a foreign country. But I can no longer deny that this is not a theme park. No theme park this humongous or elaborate exists in Japan. And even if this were an overseas country, I don't think anyone would have reason to use such fiendish methods to deceive one person.

At least, to deceive somebody who was just your average high school student until yesterday.

Starting today, you are the Maou.

If I'm not being deceived, then there's only one explanation left: "I'm in a dream."

"So until I wake up, I guess I have no choice but to go with them."

Once you get on a boat, you can't get off until it arrives at port; in baseball, most of the time the game isn't over until you've played nine innings. Which means I'll tag along until the END mark or goal is in sight.

"Did you say something? Now, Your Majesty, let us proceed. Conrad and I shall ride on either side of you."

I got it, so let's get going.

There are nine riding in front of us, the rest following behind; the entire company rides in three columns down the capital's main street. The residents lining up on both sides of the street all bow deeply towards me.

"Ah, thanks. Ah, um. Er, cheese. Ah, you don't have to be so polite."

I conscientiously return their greetings, but the senior tutor looks utterly scandalized.

"Your Majesty...please stop bowing your head to the people. You need to be more dignified."

"What are you talking about? Greetings are the foundation of interpersonal relationships. That's a universal rule."

This city looks more prosperous than the villages we've seen along the way.

At least the parts facing the main street.

I look down at the town from the back of the gracefully-pacing horse who's now behaving

almost like an honors student. You'd never imagine that it was the terrifying black demon horse which threw its master twice.

The fleet-footed horse prepared for the king is from a rare jet-black line, called blue-haired in Japan, ebony-haired in this country. It looks shorter and stouter than the racehorses I've seen in paddocks, and its legs are thicker. It seems to have all the deposition of a warhorse as well. They say that it'll continue running with its master on its back even after its heart has stopped. The reason: it has two hearts. That's pretty convenient.

I've named it "Ao" because it's easy to remember. It's like the "John" ^[1] of horse names, and it's been popular in Japan for a long time. It appears a lot in historical dramas.

People's hair and skin color are really unbelievably diverse here. Like I've been told, there's no one with black hair. But gold hair, brown hair, silver, white, red, chestnut, orange (maybe it's dyed?), purple (must be a popular dye), green (as if it contains chlorophyll)...green?!

"Hey hey hey hey hey, Günter!"

"Yes?"

"There's a green person over there—it's a s-s-s-space space space alien!"

"Ah, it's one of the Healers. The color of their blood is somewhat unique, which makes their skin very pale, but they possess the special power to improve the healing of their patients. They immigrated here two thousands years ago because they were being persecuted by humans. And it's thanks to them that we have such long lives."

"Then, then, what about that person with purple hair? The little girl from before looked like that, too."

"They are the People of the Lake Shore. There are many among them who are born with strong magical powers, and they act as teachers and guards here in the capital. As your Majesty has probably already noticed, I am also descended from the Lake Shore People."

So that's where the lilac eyes come from.

I breathe a sigh as I ride along.

"Horses with two hearts, living model skeletons that fly, people born with green and purple hair. All things you'd never see in Japan. We're not going to have to deal with things even glitzier than this, are we? Like a girl with bunny ears, or a sexy black panther girl, or a three-eyed birdman?"

I'm starting to get flustered just imagining it all. Conrad, suppressing laughter, exchanges looks with the tutor. "There are an unbelievable number of races in this kingdom, and some that even Günter and I, who have lived long lives, and the scholars cannot confirm. For example, the human-shaped population is about fifty million, but we can't even begin to count the population of the Kotsuhizoku, the Flying Skeletons Tribe and the Kotsuchizoku, the Land Skeletons Tribe, or the Aquatic and Rock Bird Tribes. And besides that, if you think about the spirits who dwell quietly in the forests and mountains, the Mazoku live everywhere: from the skies to the vast earth to the rivers and trees. Your Majesty, those who live by your will are scattered everywhere throughout this kingdom."

A little girl with gold eyes who is evidently one of this number runs a little way alongside Ao with a bouquet of flowers. The pretty, freshly-opened flowers are a light pink with multi-layered petals. Günter takes it and turns it once in inspection, then reluctantly passes it to me.

"They're ordinary decorative flowers, without either poison or thorns. That little girl probably wanted to give them to you rather than me."

"That's not true. You seem way more popular than me."

This is the first time in my life I've gotten flowers from a girl, so I'm totally not as annoyed as I might sound.

We march forward without incident, and finally reach the ramparts of a real-life castle.

The gates open ponderously.

"...Woah."

I definitely hear theme music flowing through my head right around then, along with narration by Ogata Naoto. World Heritage, aaah World Heritage, World Heritage. A one-line ode to the magnificence of the castle.

The road paved with white stones continues straight into the distance, and overflowing aqueducts follow its course on both sides. The waterway splits into two branches towards the east and west of the city. Looking up at the front of the castle, I'm reminded of the European castles you read about in stories—not the German old fortress type, but the English large-scale symmetrical country manor type that bam! appears right in front of you. It's impressive in both height and width, in full wide-screen glory. A rich green mountain guards its back, and the aqueducts pour out of hillside tunnels.

"...Um, you know, I don't really know what to say right now."

"You need say nothing; after all, this is the royal castle of the Maou, the 'Blood Pledge Castle'."

Blood Pledge? In Japanese history terms, that'd mean something like the horrible vow 'one in life and death!' that some organizations took—not a very gentle name. There's probably a reason best left unheard for a beautiful, magnificent castle like this to have a name like that...but even though I tell him that I don't want to hear it, the tutor launches into an explanation.

"When the Shinou chose this land to become the capital of his kingdom, he evidently promised the earth spirits that they would not be harmed. In gratitude and friendship, the earth spirits vowed that should this castle be occupied by any save the Maou, their blood would be taken in compensation for their crime. A pledge of blood—in other words, the Blood Pledge Castle will obey no one but His Majesty the Maou. It's said to be the royal castle which is impregnable—no, which is flawless."

"Phew, then I guess that means the castle and that king didn't make a blood pact or anything."

Conrad, looking inordinately pleased, nods down the center of the path. On either side, stretching out in front of us as far as the eye can see, is a line of soldiers standing at

attention. They'll almost certainly bow their heads to us as we pass, like a reverse stadium wave. The last time I saw people standing like this was the attack of welcoming bows when I passed through the grand opening of a store while taking a shortcut.

I can hear a tune coming from somewhere that sounds like a cross between Ravel and Elgar. It's probably the national anthem.

"From the looks of this reception, Lord von Spitzweg has failed in his wheedling, hmm?"

Who the heck is the guy who owns such a jaw-breaking name? And why is it that everyone in this country has both 'von' and 'Lord' attached to their name? Is 'von' maybe like the Japanese 'yama', which is just in a lot of people's family names—like Yamada-san and Yamamoto-san and Yamakawa-san? Or... Conrad, seeing my questioning expression, explains. As we finally step onto the grounds—yup, there's the welcome to hell salute, just as I expected.

"This kingdom is divided into areas that lie directly under the Maou's control and those that are territories of the Ten Aristocratic Houses who obey the Maou. 'Von' is attached to the surnames of those ten Houses. At one time, they styled themselves with 'von' added to the names of the land they governed, and over time it became the name of each House. Günter, for example, is from the noble House of the Lords von Kleist which governs the Kleist area. The addition of Lord or Lady denotes one who will go to the battlefield in an emergency. So basically both men and women of all the Aristocratic Houses have military ranks. Those who are prepared to fight are given that title when they reach adulthood."

Hmm? I seem to remember that the macho I met in the beginning also had a 'von' in his name.

"Lord Stuffer von Spitzweg is the older brother of the previous Maou, a man who wanted to gain power by becoming the regent. The previous Maou...who has already resigned her position and is now Her Prior Majesty the ex-Maou—when she declared her intention to resign, we moved immediately to summon Your Majesty. But he may possibly have attempted to repeal her decision. Because if he can persuade Her Prior Majesty, he can protect his own position. But in any case, he seems to have failed."

Eh? But Conrad's name doesn't...

"Now he must be contriving to get on Your Majesty's good side by throwing a grand celebration in honor of the new king's entrance into the castle."

There's an expression of something like hatred on the face of this good-natured Lord Weller for the first time, but it disappears in the time I transfer the bouquet to my right hand.

I don't know whether it's because he immediately suppresses it himself, or because Günter quickly adds, "We must no longer allow that man to do as he pleases. If nothing else, in this both Gwendal and Wolfram must certainly agree."

"I hope so."

There's something going on. Anyone, no matter how slow, would have noticed. I lean forward. My right hand, still carrying the flowers, nears the seemingly-docile Ao's ear.

"Um, so this Spitz something Spielberg person..."

How many Oscars has he won? I can't finish what I'm about to say. Because suddenly the black demon bursts forwards as if it has a V8 engine attached to its behind going full throttle.

Even I, her rider, don't know what caused the dire displeasure that prompted this wild run. What I do know is that escaping unscathed is out of the question if I'm thrown. Shouting incoherently as I cling desperately to the horse galloping full speed straight ahead, I reach the castle all alone in bizarre unceremonious abruptness.

The lines of soldiers preparing to salute probably don't even recognize the black hurricane passing in front of them as their new king. I can hear advice trailing me.

"Your Majesty! The reins, the reins—!"

"Conrart! That horse must be insufficiently trained!"

Günter's words are cut short as he kicks his horse into pursuit.

"I wouldn't have thought that something like that could set her off so. I trained her quite thoroughly, but of course not on what to do if a horsefly flies from a flower into her ear. Yooour Maaaajesty! Pull on the reins and tighten your legs—!"

As for me, all that's going through my head right about then are headlines about runaway trucks plunging into stores and customers and clerks covering their heads and running every which way. Ao skims over the uneven ground lightly and is rapidly approaching the front entrance of the castle. The soldiers lined up by the side of the road suddenly move into position to block our path, but Ao smoothly outruns them. At the center of the dumbfounded soldiers is a handsome middle-aged blond man.

She clears more obstacles, and the worst scenarios play out in my mind in the short time we're airborne.

I fall from the horse and ask Conrad and Günter to take care of the rest with my last breath before my head falls with a thud to the ground. What rest?! Why with a thud?!

Ao suddenly rears just before the closed door barring the front entrance. I'm being thrown! —Panicking, I grab not only the reins but her jet-black mane and close my eyes in anticipation of the impact. But five seconds pass, and I feel no pain.

"...She stopped..."

And I fall as soon as I lower my guard. Unfortunately, this time there's hard, cold, expensive marble beneath me. I've learned the hard way that it's important to roll with the fall, I think vaguely, lying face-up where I fell.

Ooh, the ceiling is so high up. It's almost like I'm lying on the floor of the hall of the National Science Museum.

Ao stamps several times and lowers her head down right next to mine. "Hey, what're you doing down there?" she asks with her clear eyes, as if she's clean forgotten what terrible things she was just guilty of. Her muzzle is covered with white foam.

Somebody's feet are standing next to my shoulder. My gaze shifts slightly, and a face

comes into focus from its lofty position. It must be a really outrageously tall person. But this man neither speaks nor lends me a hand. This is the first time I've seen such an overtly apathetic person since I came to this world. Maybe I really am dreaming that I'm the Maou and that I'm the master of this castle.

But if that's true, then can't it at least be more fun?

"Your Majesty—!"

I can hear Conrad and Günter's voices. And the sound of hoofs striking against stone. The man seems to gain some sort of understanding from their shouts. From his great height he lets fall a few muttered words.

"...Your Majesty...this?"

This? What's with *this*? But before I can object, the Love Theme from *Godfather* drifts into my head. Your theme song has now been decided. I get up without any help. In front of me, just as I predicted, is someone whose height I would never be able to attain no matter how many times I pass through the wheel of reincarnation.

And not just his height—I would never be able to attain his face either.

His longish hair, a thick gray which might almost be called black, is partially tied in the back. The pleasureless eyes scrutinizing me are a deep blue. His brows, set too close to those eyes, give him a generally displeased appearance, but my life experience is too short to tell me if it's because he *is* displeased. But girls would probably fall right for that dour look.

Even though they keep calling me the Maou, both internally and externally I'm just a high school student who's never been popular. At best my appearance and brains are both average. I'm not muscular, and I don't have a deep, low voice. Worse, even while I was playing baseball, I was pretty much a bench warmer for three years.

His interest piqued, perhaps, he gazes at me with head tilted. His worry is becoming more and more apparent.

"Your Majesty, are you injured?!"

Conrad, who arrives first, nimbly alights from his horse and comes up to me. The handsome middle-aged man and his troupe (the one that tried to block us earlier), which he must have passed on the way, now comes galloping up as well. Günter also leaps down from his dappled gray, shouting something. Even I cannot believe that I'm at the center of such a huge group of people.

"Are you saying that this is the new Maou?!"

He even has a sonorant testy-sounding alto voice.

Even I am quite ready to admit defeat in the battle of physical form when faced with four such ultra-beauties. That long-leggedness is a racial trait and can't be helped, and their height, shoulder-breadth, and weight are— Hey, when did I start caring this much about body builds? Probably from that day when the second pitcher said to me, "You're too small of a target—I have a horrible time pitching to you."

At least my physique is on par with *his*, but I'm utterly defeated as soon as I look up. This beauty!—what the heck! It's enough to make him glow, as if he walks around with a halo on his head. Maybe it's just because of his dazzling blond hair. He looks and sounds like an older boy from the Vienna Boys Choir. Transparent white skin, emerald green irises that remind me of the bottom of a lake, and he doesn't even have a split chin. It's an angel—though right then, an angry angel. But since he's here, he must be one of the beautiful Mazoku instead.

"Gwendal...no—Elder Brother, are you going to welcome this human whose lineage we don't even know, brought by the likes of *him*, as the new king?!"



Him—the girls-manga-style ultra-beautiful young man glares sharply at Conrad. I heard the name Gwendal earlier, but I'm also sure I heard something like Wolfgang or Wolfram. So the *Godfather* Love Theme guy must be Gwendal, and the Vienna Boys Choir OB is Wolfram?

"I'll never be able to trust such a filthy *humanoid*. Judging from his appearance, he has neither intelligence nor dignity, and besides, to have tumbled down the highway in *that* area..."

"Wolfram!" It's not Gwendal, whom he called his brother, but Günter who cuts him off. "What appalling—! If His Majesty were not so munificent, your life would be forfeit!"

Munificent? Is he talking about me? He must be thinking of somebody else.

"Please watch your mouth; even if you are the crown prince, I will not tolerate disrespect towards His Majesty. And stop speaking ill of Conrart as well; he is, after all, your older brother."

Eh?

The relationship map between these people is jumbling me up just listening to them. The Godfather and the Vienna Boys Choir OB are brothers, and Conrad is Wolfram's older brother, which means...

Gwendal, Conrart, Wolfram.

They're three Mazoku brothers.

"...No way?! But, but you look nothing alike—!"

"Sorry about that," Conrad says smiling as he walks across to me. His expression says that he's already used to this. "All of us have different fathers. But, alike or not, we cannot deny the blood connection. Gwendal is my older brother, Wolfram my younger. Even though they would probably never personally admit to that."

And you? I ask in my mind.

Conrad, how do you think of them?

But before I can ask that question, all attention focuses back on me at Günter's next words: "You are in the presence of His Majesty."

"Your New Royal Majesty!"

The handsome middle-aged man rushes over. Now that I'm used to beautiful forms, this man can't even compare. Hmm, leeeet's seee, he's quite handsome for someone in his fifties, with dark blond hair and blue eyes. But in the depths of his eyes, behind a hidden door, lie cowardly schemes.

"I am Stuffel von Spitzweg, the brother of the previous king, now Her Prior Majesty, Lady Cäcilie von Spitzweg. I am serving in the position of Regent for the prosperity of this kingdom, and I am overjoyed at the safe arrival of Your Majesty."

"Hey, you know, Lord von Spitzweg," I say to him in a purposely casual tone, "who would you rather have as the Maou: me or your siblings?"

"Huh?!"

Moooron. Isn't not replying immediately proof that you'd pick yourself?

"Ah, of course it would be Your New Royal Majesty! To have you become our new king during this propitious time is to the benefit of all our people. You are our savior, and you will pave the way to the new future of this kingdom. I have already heard of your great-souledness."

"I think you've got the wrong person. I am not such a great-souled person."

"What humbleness! That jet-black hair, those midnight eyes! You are the one who stands at the summit of the Mazoku."

According to the standards of this country, black hair and eyes let me win over such handsome guys as you? So just by being an ordinary Japanese person, I can become heir to the throne of this country?

Ugh, that just sounds so fake.

I can't really be the king if I can't do anything to prove it.

"Where's your proof?!" The blond angelic Wolfram demands with hostility as if he's speaking my thoughts out loud. "Where's your proof that he's the real thing? I'll never admit to this kid being the Maou until I see proof."

"Kid?! Oh wait, I guess I'm bad at telling foreigners' ages too, but. But! No matter how I look at it, you're the same age as me! And if the average American high-schooler is more mature, then I may even be older than you!"

"How old are you?" The overbearing third son asks, arrogantly crossing his arms. Guess I won't have to command him to stop being too polite.

"...Fifteen...I'll be sixteen in two months..."

"Humph."

"What's with the 'humph'? How old are you, then?! You're not gonna tell me you're an old man wearing a pretty boy's wig, are you?"

"I'm eighty-two."

"...Huh?"

Eighty-two? With youthful clear skin and a head full of hair?

"That's totally impossible!"

You guys have more life experience than my granddad?!

My first bath in two days is in a room reserved for my private use.

The cream-tiled bathroom is the Maou's private bath. The bathtub is as spacious as an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and hot water gurgles in streams from the mouths of five cows along one edge. I submerge myself comfortably into a corner of the first lane and ponder what's happened to me as well as what the future will bring.

What are you going to do and what will become of you, Shibuya Yuuri?!

I've been sucked down a Western-style toilet and expelled into a theme park-style other world, had rocks thrown at me by the residents, told that I'm the Maou, told that I have to kill the humans, forced to ride a horse that almost killed me, fawned over by everyone, brought to a castle with a scary name, called 'this', told that I would not be recognized as the Maou, told that everyone's real age is five times what they appear, and taken into the castle with the scary name.

It has two hundred fifty-two rooms on three floors (five floors in one section) with ceilings so impossibly high that even Godzilla would have a hard time hitting a ceiling serve.

Its stairs are breath-stealingly long, and there are more than one hundred ninety people working inside. The stables are modest, but there is a huge barracks with four thousand five hundred full-time soldiers. There are additional lodgings in other parts, now being used by Gwendal and Wolfram's troops, brought from their own territories.

The room I've been given for now is as big as a basketball court, with a fire blazing in the fireplace and fabrics and furs strewn on the floor. On the white-coated stone wall is a picture like something I once saw when my mom took me to Ueno in elementary school. The remaining three sides have what look like national flags and tapestries. Surprisingly, there are also decorative plants in the nooks.

"No TVs, games, or MDs."

What's more, there's no electricity, gas, or telephone.

"...The bed...is ultra-huge..."

The bed is humongous.

It's lacking a canopy, but it's so big that five junior high kids could sleep on it together no problem.

A handsome attendant wearing only a loincloth that barely covers his essential parts comes over with a gorgeous gilded bucket and proposes to wash my back. I turn him down flat. He just ticked off my inferiority complex.

I pour a light pink liquid into my hand from a nearby bottle. Oh, what a nice smell. This must be shampoo. I rub it in thoroughly, then pour water over myself from a bucket. There's no conditioner! I'm a sports guy more than a manly man.

I thoroughly wash the rest of my body as well, and since this is the first real bath I've had in two days, I'm wavering between indulging in it more and getting out when—

"Oh my."

From the entrance opposite to the one I used, a woman wearing only a bath towel appears. Not a girl: a woman. Is this supposed to be a mixed bath?! Wait, I'm sure Günter said that this is a private bath. So is she...some kind of free service for me? What kind of perverted service is this?! No, it's probably just that I didn't know because I've been a commoner until now, but kings and ministers and members of congress probably have them. But—wait wait wait—! Why of all things is she stretching out in the second lane in a pool this big?

This woman with golden ringlets reaching down to her hips, who's way too sexy for my peace of mind, is submerged in the water up to her chest just one meter away from me. I can't see very well because my eyes are hazy from the steam—or maybe from the mental strain and agitation—but she's an absolute pheromone system. She's a bombshell under the towel, and she's even more beautiful as the heat flushes her cheeks and lips pink.

And she's a 'woman.' Not a 'girl' my age.

"Ooooh my."

"Ah, er, um, I-I-I-I wasn't told that this is a mixed bath."

"Oh no, it's perfectly fine. This bath is for exclusive the use of the Maou. I only ended up here out of habit. Please don't mind me, Your Majesty."

"Urgh, ah, wait, no, don't-don't come any closer to me!"

"So you are His Majesty the new Maou, aren't you? How unexpected it is to meet you here."

Maybe because the blood is rushing to my head, heart, and lower body right about now, I've stopped being able to make any rational judgments. Oh no, this is bad! And since I'm a regular teenager going through puberty, the badness is ten times, twenty times worse!

"Look-look here, miss—I mean, lady. Isn't it a violation of the rules to enter the bath without rinsing?! And coming in with a bath towel! Soaking in a public bath house with a towel is a serious breach of etiquette!"

My voices comes echoing back. I can't say it like Mino Monta.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry. It's been such a long time since I've bathed with a gentleman," she says, gazing at me as I stand there petrified. "Teehee...you're sooo cute!"

That's when I bolt with a shout that's not quite a cry or a scream.

What do you mean I'm cute, Miss Sexy?—why were you in the king's bath, Miss Pheromone?—and finally, who are you, Miss Sexy Queen?!

I dash off with only a towel wrapped around my waist, and when I fly into the room that I think they told me is mine, I'm greeted with yet another cute young girl, and I shout incoherently.

"What is the matter, Your Majesty?"

"What's wrong, Your Majesty?"

The two self-proclaimed members of the Yuuri Faction murmur in low voices as they arrive at a gallop, their blank gazes taking in the young woman with arms full of glossy black cloth trembling in a corner and their new Majesty the Maou cowering behind the gigantic bed. My butt is hanging out.

"Your Majesty, Your Majesty!"

"...I like girls. I like girls, but if they're asking to see me, I'd rather not—I mean, it's not like I'm not that big or impressive or anything."

Conrad sends the maid away and comes towards the bed. That's when I finally calm down enough to sit up and adjust the sheet around my waist.

"Goodness, it's too bad that your posterior is now all tucked away."

"Is there no privacy in this world?!"

"Your Majesty, it's natural for a king to have attendants and maids. If you're surprised by every little thing..."

"But they don't have to come into my bathroom or my bedroom, do they?! I mean, then where would you hide your porn in this world? If a beautiful nude woman tries to pick me up in the bath, where can I run to to get a breather?"

"A beautiful nude woman in the bathroom? Aaah..."

Conrad looks up at the ceiling as if to say 'Oh my god!'

"...She's gone and done it."

"I thought it was some kind of service and would probably have made a request if I'd stayed any longer...well, I'm not much of a big-shot right now, so I only ran away and came back here."

"That's good, I'm thankful for Your Majesty's good sense."

"Oh, oooh, Your Mabezy, preaze puh zus on," says the Tutor through a stuffed nose, holding a black piece of cloth. His eyes are swimming with tears.

"What happened to you all of a sudden? Allergies?"

"My-my abologeez! As I see you standing here after going through all the hardships of coming to a world with such different customs for the first time and enduring such an extreme change in your circumstances...it's too courageous and sweet at the same time...aaah, I'm so sorry! What outrageous things I'm saying! I-I'm so flustered."

"What's wrong, Günter? This is not like you."

"If you have allergies, you should go rinse your nose. It always makes my brother feel better."

My fingers brush against Günter's arm as I reach out for the clothes. He back-peddles with incredible speed until he hits the wall. His face is so red it looks like he has a fever. I pick up the topmost piece of glossy clothing—it seems to be some kind of underwear.

"Even the underpants are black and glossy and—"

—It's a thong. One of those things you tie on both sides. I turn to Conrad, who looks as if all of this were quite natural.

"I'm a guy! Why am I supposed to wear a thong?!"

"Hm? That's quite the fashionable underwear right now."

"No way! Then is he is he is he wearing a thong too?! You're telling me that he can have that sort of expression on his face while wearing a thong?! Don't tell me that even you—"

"Oh, no, mine are more plebeian..."

"Buuufft."



We turn at the same time to see Günter at the wall holding his nose. Maybe he really is suffering from allergies—I'd be sure of it if he sneezed. He looks glassy-eyed, too, and—how do I say this—he sounds like he's suddenly become an Italian. And he's so fantastically beautiful too that if I were a girl I'd probably totally fall for him.

"Please don't embarrass me by talking like an uptight old woman, Your Majesty. To reject easily-removable underwear is the same as rejecting me when I knock on the door...ah...huh?! What was I just...!"

It feels like he's about to present me with deep red roses at any moment, but after spazzing out for a moment he comes back to himself.

"M-my deebez abologies! For having such in-in-insolent thoughts!"

"That's why I said if you clean your nose with a saline solution and drink some...insolent—eh? what?"

"I'll go cool off my head!"

"Clean, I said, not cool!" I shout after him as he dashes out, but I don't think he hears me. But for now my problem is this underwear I'm holding gingerly with my fingertips. There's only a scrappy piece of cloth in the middle—I can't think of it as anything but embarrassing.

"But I guess even Japanese people have traditional 'sumo loinclothes'."

"That's quite true, Your Majesty. And perhaps you'll even enjoy wearing it, and discover a new self."

I don't want to discover a new self.

"But I wonder what in the world got into Günter? There, after the underwear comes— Eh?"

Conrad leans close to me as he passes me piece after piece of clothing that look very like my school uniform.

"...Your Majesty, you smell quite nice."

"Oh, it's probably the shampoo. The pink stuff that was in the bathroom."

Though I have no idea who left it there.

The Shinou's banquet is nothing like those programs that show you useful tricks or the ones that teach guest former pro baseball superstars all about wine.

"It's a special, high-class dinner for only His Majesty the new Maou and those in his inner circle."

Somehow, even with cotton stuffed in his nose, Günter is in strangely high spirits as he leads the way with shoulders thrown back. His hair falls smoothly down his back. His clothes look like a priest's garments: off-white full-length robes with beautiful gold-threaded embroidery down the front.

"Excuse my lateness."

Conrad, who changed in great haste before hurrying back, catches up to us in a trot. He'll definitely be hailed as the cosplay king this year looking like that. I'm not kidding.

The snow-white navy uniform he's wearing would be the yearning of any American girl. *Setting off on a Journey of Love and Youth*—original title: *An Officer and a Gentleman*—starring Richard Gere. With that familiar theme song as background music, he could easily be called an all-American numero uno. Even without the hat.

"So I guess that's a uniform, huh?"

Mountains spread out beyond the window, and I can see lights at their summits. It's already dark around us, and those lights twinkle brighter than the stars.

"Please look there—those are the lights of the holy ground of the Mazoku, the Shinou Mausoleum. The great Shinou, who is the origin of everything for us, sleeps there."

Even the Mazoku have a holy ground? I put the question aside and look at the flickering flames at the summit. I wonder if it's something like a temple in Japan? From the viewpoint of modern Japanese Shibuya Yuuri, the Shinou is something like a god to these people. Since he has a tomb, he's probably already left this world.

But because of the Shinou's oracle or command or something, I was brought here.

"...Though I don't know about being the king or anything."

"Your Majesty, please take a look here as well—this hall also serves as a gallery, and the

gallant forms of the generations of Maous are all painted here. Though the portraits of the previous Maou and the one before that are not yet completed.

Twenty portraits wider than my outstretched hands hang in the endless corridor. All of them were drawn with painful attention to realism and detail.

"It feels like the time I went to see the Barnes Collection in Ueno."

"They are lined up on this side starting from the most recent. This is the Twenty-Fourth Maou, His Majesty Beltran von Radford. The people revered him as 'the Lion King'.

"Lion king, huh? I guess every world has a nickname like that."

"This is the Twenty-Third Maou, His Majesty Jeannot von Karbelnikoff, called the Stern. And this is the Twenty-Second Maou, His Majesty Ropelewski Arsenio, renowned as the Mighty Warrior King. This is the Twenty-First Maou, His Majesty Dwayne von Gyllenhaal the Belligerent, and before that, His Majesty Henstridge Davidson the Slaughterer, His Majesty Basilio von Rochefort the Cruel..."

"These nicknames are getting more and more dangerous, aren't they? Aren't there any with more easygoing names like The Oil Magnate or The Newspaper King or the Brand King?"

"Well...we don't have oil or newspapers or brands..."

"The Fifteenth Maou, Her Majesty Grisela Trintignant Yaft the Beheader. The Fourteenth Maou, Her Majesty Brittany von Wincott the Blood-Spiller..."

The character traits of the Mazoku are surfacing.

Some are seated in chairs with hands on their dogs, others leaning against swords thrust into the ground. There are also pictures of Maous on horseback holding poles decorated with the freshly-severed heads of their defeated foes. There are perhaps three women in the lot, as well as kings who look no older than boys.

But though they differ in the color of their hair and eyes, over time their beauty is comparable, and as we go further back in time, they seem less and less human. Well, basically you'd say that they're not human. Their garments are much fantastically richer in color than that of the modern Mazoku, and they're drawn wearing cloaks and armor.

"In the old days they all looked like they were in a RPG, huh? Guess this wouldn't be a sword and magic world otherwise. Your military uniforms look too modern. Oh, what about him?"

"That is the Seventh Maou, His Majesty Forgeas von Voltaire."

"He looks just like the Godfather Love Theme guy from earlier!"

"God...you mean Gwendal? That is his ancestor."

"Huh?! Then why isn't he the next Maou? If his ancestor was the king, then wouldn't the descendants succeed him as the king?"

Günter puts on his teacher face and says with head slightly tilted to one side, "Your

Majesty, the position of Maou is not hereditary."

"But it's not elected either, right? It's so hard to understand, I can't stand it!"

"That's understandable, since you were raised in another world. Well, but you'll come to understand it—after a year you'll be a very kingly Maou."

"A year?! I'm going to live here for a year?!" I ask Conrad in return, and the Tutor looks at me with astonishment.

"Your Majesty is the king of this country, so it's quite obvious that you'll be spending the rest of your life here. A year would be nothing, would it?"

This is becoming a major disaster. If this continues, I'll definitely end up having to repeat a grade. And doubly bad considering that this is May of my first year of senior high, when school has just started—it's too early no matter how you look at it. I'll just have to complete this mission that's been given to me quickly and aim at reaching the goal in the shortest time possible.

"And here is he who united the Mazoku, defeated the Soushu, and founded the Kingdom of Shinma: our first king, His Majesty the Shinou. Glory to his exalted soul."

"Huuuh, now *he* looks just like that kid. It must be one of his ancestors. So what's his name?"

"We must not speak his name without necessity."

"You won't even tell me his name? Sheesh, how selfish is that."

"Your Majesty!"

"But it's because of him that I was brought here and sent away before that, right? My soul was sent flying off to another world just because of something said by some dead guy? But still you won't even tell me his name—that's what I'd call selfish."

"I'll tell you later, Your Majesty."

There's suppressed laughter in Conrad's voice.

A golden-haired young man stands with a naked sword in one hand in the conspicuously large portrait, arranged front and center. He looks very like Wolfram. Except that his eyes are the bright blue of a lake surface on a clear day, and something about him seems different from the Mazoku that come after him. From my amateur impressions, he's looks like a "self-important big-shot born to be the Maou."

"...Who's he?"

In this single painting, the Maou is not alone. The person standing a little behind him is clearly different from the kings in the other portraits. He's dressed in very ordinary, functional clothes, and is wearing neither sword nor armor. From the suggestion of a faint smile at the corners of his lips, he doesn't appear to be a retainer or servant.

"He looks rather oriental, doesn't he?"

Günter's proud explanation conveys his heartfelt reverence and affection even to someone completely unfamiliar with this person.

"He is the Great Sage of the Twin Black, the only person in this world who is of equivalent status to the Shinou. If he had not existed, we would have been destroyed in the battle against the Sousei, and would have become wanderers without land or country. Though this world would probably have been destroyed before then."

"So then he's an amazing person?"

"Quite so. And more beautiful than anyone!"

"Huuuh?!"

I guess their aesthetics are completely unfathomable to a Japanese person. However you look at it, this serene Oriental can only be called refined. Actually, he looks more intelligent than beautiful.

"He and Your Majesty bear a great resemblance to each other. When they ascertain it for themselves, the people will also certainly joyfully extol your nobility!"

The cotton shoots out of Lord von Kleist's nose. Hey, hold on, your nose is bleeding—there's blood coming out of your nose!

"I don't look like him at all! I mean, how! How are we alike?!"

"Come, come, Your Majesty, look at the color of your hair, your eyes. You bear a striking resemblance to an amazing person, Your Majesty. Now that's charisma!"

"I keep telling you that most Japanese people have black eyes and hair!"

Other than that, he doesn't look anything like me or my family.

Damn you, Shinou, I curse him in my heart.

Thanks to you, a dead person, I've been sucked deeper and deeper into this. And if I get kept back a year, I'll go lay waste to your mausoleum or whatever it is.

I didn't know then that these curses would all rebound back on me.

Günter, enraptured by his own intoxicated oration, goes off on a romantic rant.

"The Shinou is the Darkness and the Great Sage is the Light. They pursue each other, yearn for each other, and bear each other's colors in their own bodies: Darkness to Light, Light to Darkness!"

"Let's leave him here—this is going to take a while."

Conrad's apparently used to this.

footnotes

[1] "Tarou" (太郎) in Japanese

Chapter 4

Is this really supposed to be a dinner party?

As I step up to the round table of milky-white stone, I can feel all my limbs going stiff from the tension.

"It kinda looks more like a military conference than a dinner party."

In the room are the eldest and youngest brothers, both dressed matter-of-factly in uniforms. Since it's true for Conrad, their military uniforms must be their formal dress too. But though each uniform has the same design, they're different colors. Gwendal is in spotless viridian, while Wolfram is wearing a deep navy blue. There're lots of cases where variations in color show differences in post, and they make it easy to distinguish between land, sea, and air.

A man carrying a tray, who appears to be the waiter, bows deeply to me. But there's not even the first 'g' of a greeting forthcoming from the eldest and youngest brothers, who're sitting with what look like champagne in their hands. Of course I'm the one who can't stand the awkward atmosphere.

"Go-good evening."

Wolfram snorts with laughter. Scorn from someone who's good-looking makes it three times as offensive. Conrad enters chuckling and places his left hand on Gwendal's back.

"Your Majesty, this is my older brother, Lord Gwendal von Voltaire. And this is—"

He's shaken off with hostility as his hand slides through the glittering gold hair.

"—my younger brother Lord Wolfram von Bielefeld. Both of them were Their Highnesses until just a little while ago, Their Excellencies now. Of course, they are many ranks below Your Majesty, so you can feel free to call them by their names."

"Don't touch me!" Gwendal is silent, but the younger one yelps hysterically. "Didn't I tell you not to touch me with those human hands?! I've never once thought of you as my brother."

"Yes, yes, I got it, so don't throw your drink at me. Unlike the both of you, I'm in white, so removing the stains would be quite a task."

He really seems quite used to all of this. Conrad moves away from his brothers. The pretty boy is a wasted effort.

"I've explained that we have different fathers, yes? You have probably also already noticed that I am the only one here who is not of the Ten Aristocratic Houses. My father was a traveler, a man of unknown lineage who had nothing of worth other than his sword."

There's an annoyed expression on Wolfram's face. Gwendal is apathetic.

"Then you're a half-blood? Oh, I guess you don't call it half or double here. So you have a Mazoku mother and a..."

"Human father. With light brown hair and eyes, and not a penny to his name."

"And an exceedingly fine man."

Everyone turns to the entrance at the same time. The Sexy Queen, looking so lascivious that it's verging on a crime, smiles. She has on a tight black dress of some matted material that is open down to her navel, with a slit that completely exposes her long, beautiful legs. She's wearing no adornments at all, as if she's declaring that she herself is a jewel.

She's emitting more pheromones now than when she was naked.

"Mother!"

"Mother?!"

I don't know who among the three calls out, but she must be the mother of all three. Is it even decent for the mother of people who're close to a hundred to look like she's around thirty or so?

"Thirty...times five...a hundred fifty...she's about a hundred and fifty??"

In other words, I was getting excited over a lady who's a hundred and fifty years old? There is a limit even if you like older women.

Meanwhile, the mother has embraced her nearest son. Her golden ringlets fall elegantly down her back.

"It's been a while, Conrart. You've become more and more the handsome man your father was in such a short time."

"Mother, you are ever more beautiful, as always."

"Oh my, I'm sure you say that to all the girls!"



Is this supposed to be a conversation between a mother and her son?

Though she hugs each of her sons tightly, the only time you can barely convince yourself that they're parent and child is with her third child Wolfram; with her eldest son Gwendal, she looks like an older but coquettish girlfriend with her younger but composed boyfriend.

I secretly ask her second son, "Were any of you children brought by your fathers into a second marriage, maybe?"

"No, she did indeed give birth to all three of us."

"Gwen, you're wrinkling your forehead again. You'll scare the girls away if you keep doing that! Aaah, Wolf! Wolf, let me take a good look at you. Oh my, you look just like me, as usual. I'll bet the gentlemen are all over you."

"...Mother, we saw each other just this morning. And it doesn't make me happy to be liked by men."

"Really? Is that how boys are like? I guess that's why they say that it's hard to understand the feelings of boys at this age. Aaaah, I wonder why I could never give birth to a girl. Boys are so crude—they distance themselves from their mothers so quickly."

"I would never distance myself from you, Mother!"

"Oh? Really?"

"Of course!"

What a silly pair.

But the Queen immediately turns her assault on me.

"Your Majesty!"

"Yeek!"

That captivating body presses against my fifteen-year-old average pubescent high-school-student body. Our faces are at the same level, and close enough to kiss. There's a smile on the rose lips.

"We met in the bath—you're His Majesty the new Maou, right?"

"R-right."

"The nervousness is making you so stiff—it's very sweet. I've always thought that it would be wonderful if someone like you could be the new king."

"Er, right." The stiffness is from the assets of her dynamite body pressing against my chest.

"So, King Yuuri. You're called King Yuuri, right?"

"Er, right." This is not the place to be answering like a guest on a talk show.

"Do you have a lover?"

"That is quite enough of that!"

"Aaaaw." She makes strange sexy sounds as Günter pulls her off me. He forces his way through with neither shyness nor anger.

"Please stop falling in love with His Majesty the new Maou, Your Majesty the Prior Maou!"

"Aaaw, Günter. You sound like a cynical widow."

"You can hate me and abuse me all you wish. But in any case, I would like to avert such an improper relationship as the former Maou becoming the mistress...excuse me, the lover of the new Maou."

"The former Maou? Who? This...lady?"

So she's not a Sexy Queen, but a real queen? The beautiful Mazoku (or maybe witch) wearing the black dress holds out her white hand to me with a smile.

"Welcome to Shinma Kingdom, King Yuuri. I am your predecessor, Cäcilie von Spitzweg. Your Majesty was called here when I announced that I would step down from the throne."

"Then I'm here thanks to you, Lady Cäcilia? No? Li...e? Uuu...no, um...von Spitzweg?"

"Call me Cäli. Cä-li. My brother asked me to reconsider, but I'm fed up with a life that won't even let me love as I want!"

Lady Cäli, because of a reason like *that*, I was told to become the Maou even though I'm still a minor, I lament, gripping the slender fingers in front of me. Oh, if only the owner of

these beautiful ice fish fingers had stayed in power for the next hundred years or so, I would have lived the life of an ordinary person in Japan...and though unhappily my wife passed on before me, on one spring day in my latter years as I'm watching over my only son and daughter-in-law and their cute grandchildren, I can make a trip to the next world. Wait—what if the next world is this world? If that's the case, then does that mean that right now at this moment, I'm dead...?

"What's wrong, Your Majesty?"

The revolving lantern of my bright family planning goes out.

There's a story that goes something like this:

At a banquet in a certain kingdom, one guest was so nervous that he mistakenly took a bowl of water meant for washing his fingers and drank it down in one gulp in front of the king and all his nobles. The nobles around him called him a 'mannerless oaf' and laughed coldly, and dipped their hands gracefully into their bowls. But only the princess nonchalantly drank all the water in her finger bowl. So that the guest would not be embarrassed.

A bowl is just a bowl, not the American Superbowl—that's the way hospitality should be. Or so the heart-warming anecdote goes.

If I drink down all of this water, would anyone be the kind princess for me?

I breathe a secret sigh as I watch water being poured into the silver bowl.

This is pointless. I can get along with someone like Conrad, but the eldest and youngest sons are hopeless. I don't know where Madam Cäli stands, but judging from her pretension of complete innocence, I'm guessing I'd better not test her.

I discretely dip both my hands into the small bowl. And...

"Huh?!"

Everyone else has taken up the bowl in their hands and drained the contents at a single gulp! Oh shoot, I never did read the book of morals seriously. Conrad has the waiter remove his bowl without drinking.

"You seem to know quite a lot about filth, cleansing yourself with the alcohol."

Wolfram, sitting next to me, takes the straightforward malicious approach. So that was alcohol? Then it's all good, since I don't drink anyway. It's not because of the law that I don't drink alcohol or smoke, but because I want to keep my heart and body healthy.

Günter gives some instructions to the waiters from a small distance away from the round table. He can't have a seat at the Shinou's dinner because he's not a close blood relative of the Maou. So only five people sit at the table. The seating order goes clockwise from youngest to oldest: me, the new king, His Majesty Yuuri; Wolfram, the former His Highness the Crown Prince; Conrad, the former His Highness the Crown Prince; Gwendal, the former His Highness the Crown Prince; and the previous Maou, Cäcilie, Her Prior Majesty.

That's how I got caught between Wolfram, who hates me, and Queen Pheromone, who fidgets even while eating. I understand quite well that Wolfram hates me because he suddenly got demoted from the position of prince just recently. Though if they'd had some sort of safe inheritance system, they wouldn't have ended up with a situation as messy as this.

The waiter pours something (probably alcohol again) into my Edo-style faceted glass and leans down slightly like they do for in-flight meals to ask me, "Your Majesty, which would you like for the meat course: fowl or mammalian or reptile or amphibian?"

Which?! Well, of course I know that there were players on the old Yakult team who ate crocodiles, so I shouldn't be surprised, but I guess the cuisine in this world is really different too. Even in Japan, the pit viper is a national specialty. Though most of the time it's just eel even though they call it pit viper.

"We-well, since I'm a growing teenager, I'll get mammal. No wait, hold on. What kind of wonderful things are in the mammal dish for tonight? Nothing like fresh monkey or just-born puppy, right?!"

Image visual: Chinese food market.

"It's cow." Oh good.

"A top-quality eight-stomach, five-horn specimen."

"Five horn...gene manipulation or something, maybe...uuuuh, then I'll take the cow."

Rumen, reticulum, omasum, abomasum...darn, I can't remember any more stomachs than that. The waiter carries in a soup which looks and smells like consommé, as well as a plate of what looks like hors d'oeuvres. I pick up the knife and the fork substitute: a polished, spotless silver—

"...This spork really brings back memories. Well, it does make sense."

For my school lunch in elementary school, a single one of these served a dual purpose. Here you can use it for both the soup and the hors d'oeuvres.

"Your Majesty, what kind of a world did you grow up in? How is it different from our world?"

Căcilie, her Prior Majesty the Former Maou, squeezes my right hand. The temperature of this former sports-oriented unpopular male high school student instantly rises two notches.

"Wh-what kind of a world? Uh, it's not really anything special, kinda boring, actually. Oh, but it's really different from this world. Nobody can use magic there, though it's further along scientifically..."

"Science! I've heard of it. It's a technique that allows people who don't have any sort of magic to bring down their enemies from far away, right? The human countries are apparently doing research on it. It's such a terrible thing, to have something that will allow you to attack further than bows and arrows. I wonder if the humans will keep to our truce then."

The youngest son says to his mother with cold eyes, "I don't think they're capable of such morals."

"Please don't speak of such dreadful things, Wolfram. What would we do if something like that happened?"

"It's simple. We'll stop suppressing our Majutsu. The humans are getting cocky only because we've tried to be fair and fight them on equal footing.

"Wait wait wait, that's not what science is for! I mean, er, um, it makes machines to take care of the troublesome things like sweeping and washing the laundry, and plowing the fields in one stretch. The point is, they make people's lives more comfortable."

Lady Cäli is adorably surprised.

"I've never thought of sweeping and washing the laundry as being troublesome. They're the jobs of the sweepers and the laundresses, after all."

I never thought of what a queen's life would be like until now.

"S-so that's why machines do those jobs instead of people."

"But then there would be no jobs left for the servants to do, right?"

"Then those people can get jobs at the vacuum cleaner and washing machine factories..."

And now I have no idea if they really make people's lives more comfortable or not.

"Then, Your Majesty, what about love? Is there love between different species? Of course obstacles and opposition make love even more passionate, right?"

Different species doesn't translate very well. She's probably hinting at Mazoku and humans, but how do you translate that into something a Japanese person would understand? International marriages? People already do that freely, so they don't really need to yearn after it. Or maybe human and chimpanzee? I don't think they fall in love with each other very often.

"But you seem to have come from a very distant world. I am so happy that you have taken the throne—I can finally leave the castle now. I've always wanted to go on a journey of free love. Don't you think that's wonderful?"

I nod, my fingers still in her grip. "Th-that is wonderful."

Wonderful things are brought to the table. It's the main meat course. In front of me is a piece of red steak that can't be called anything but rare, and that only if you're being generous. In front of the former queen are several round amphibian...no, it's one grilled amphibian. I try a one-line haiku: With *that* face do you / eat a frog at this table / oh fair Sexy Queen.

"It must have made you very uneasy to be suddenly told that you're now the king, wondering whether or not you'll be able to do it. It was the same for me. One day a messenger suddenly arrived and told me: Your soul has been chosen as that of the next Maou by the word of the Shinou. But you know, Your Majesty, you mustn't worry too much about it. All the difficult things will be taken care of by the people around you, and I'm sure my brother and children will all devote themselves to your service."

"Mother!" Wolfram, cutting into his fowl with a knife, protests. "I have no intention of serving him. We don't even know for certain if this guy deserves to be the next Maou or not, and I can't consent to it."

"My. Then will you take the throne, Wolfram?"

He then scoops up some white thing that looks like a potato and places it on his plate as he shakes his head.

"Of course not. It would be far and away more appropriate for my brother to take the throne. He'd teach those stupid cowardly humans a thing or two."

Then he picks up a glass of some wine-like liquid.

Conrad, next to him, raises some fish to his mouth as if he has not heard. To the youngest child, apparently, his taciturn eldest brother is his only brother.

"Don't you think so, Gwendal?"

He cuts into the chicken again in regular sequence. The former queen inclines her head adorably.

"But, Wolfram, you too should know what consequences befall the king who disobeys the Shinou's words."

Apparently if you don't act according to those words from on high, something terrible will happen. So if I refuse to become the Maou, will the terrible thing befall this country and its people, or it will befall me the newcomer?

"Of course, that includes you as well, Your Majesty."

"Huuuuuh?!"

I guess Conrad's seen right through me.

"What's with that! I've never thought or wanted or asked to become a king. I mean, this is pretty much like coercion."

"...I thought so."

Next up is the potato—I'm shooting quick side glances at Wolfram's spoon, so Gwendal's muttered retort catches me off-guard. That short phrase drips with contempt.

"You never intended to become the king in the first place," Gwendal continues, holding the glass that looks too stout for drinking wine, not even looking at me. There is no reflection of the cowardly Japanese in his frozen blue eyes.

"I don't care if he has the Twin Black or if he's the one holds the Darkness. He can't become the Maou. He was never prepared for it in the first place. Is that not true, Visitor From Another World?"

"Um...er, I guess..."

Conrad interrupts my unintentionally affirmative reply.

"He has only been in this world for two days. His Majesty is still confused. Are such rude speculations not somewhat too arrogant, Lord von Voltaire?"

"But this is a reality we cannot escape from. You should know it better than anyone, how many sacrifices a head of state who has no intention of fulfilling his responsibilities will make of the people? Your Majesty, if, as I said, you are not prepared to live as a king, then please return to your own world immediately.

This man who looks like he would have been suited for the position of Maou turns his cold smile on me for the first time.

"I make this request as the representative of the Mazoku. Vanish from our gaze before you raise the people's hopes too much."

"I..."

—*Want to go back if you can send me back*—something that even I don't really understand chokes the words in my throat before they make it out; something like obstinacy or pride or a show of courage, perhaps.

I turn to my red beef to try and pull myself together. At the table the bashing of the new Maou continues.

Gwen and Wolf are on the offense, Lady Cäli is neutral, and Conrad appears to be fighting this battle alone.

"I don't know if he really holds the soul of the Maou or not, and neither do I have any special desire to check. He'll be gone soon, in any case. It would be wise to search for a substitute."

"He is the real thing, Gwen."

"How can you be so sure?"

Only the rare steak lies within my field of vision, but I can see Conrad's tiny smile. And seeing it, I realize something. That even when I didn't know anything of him but his back and the top of his head, I knew that I had seen his smile before.

"I would never mistake anyone else for Yuuri."

Wolfram immediately flares up impetuously. "What kind of evidence is that? If words were always adequate, then we'd never be deceived, right?! He's probably dyed his hair, and his eyes...probably have colored glass in them—there are countless ways to fake his appearance."

"Unfortunately, I have no proof to show you that will convince you."

"Then don't say that with so much certainty! In any case, even if he *is* the owner of the Maou's soul, in the end he's still just a lowborn little punk who was raised among humans. We can't let someone like him run the country. It would be a blemish on the history of the Great Mazoku."

"Wolfram, a person's worth is not decided at birth. It's something that is determined by how he lives his life. But if you're so obsessed about it, I'll tell you this: His Majesty's soul was given into the guardianship of the Maou of that world, who chose the proper custodian from among his subordinates. That was His Majesty's father, through whom the blood of the Mazoku unquestioningly flows, though he is not of this world."

"Huh?! No way—my dad's a demon?!"

Not demon: Mazoku. Bankers were called ogres and demons when Japan collapsed into its record-setting slump. But, I mean, my dad's really Mazoku?! How am I supposed to act around him after this?

"How am I supposed to face him now? Now that I know my dad's Mazoku?"

"Look at it from his point of view: his son is the Maou, after all, so it's all good."

The second son looks completely nonchalant. That's true, I guess. That's awful.

"But Conrad, how do you know about my dad...?"

"Even if his father is Mazoku! His mother's still human, isn't she?!"

Apparently he's not about to give up the attack so easily. Wolfram gulps down the contents of his cup, his beauty making the glare he sends my way all the fiercer.

"The blood that flows through your body is no more than half Mazoku. It's no wonder you and Conrart agree so well—'cause both of you are 'psuedo!' The other half is the filthy flesh and blood of humans, some mongrel bitch, some harlot from somewhere. And a guy like you..."

Oh shit. But it's already too late when that thought enters my head. Regret never comes first. When I stopped playing baseball after ten years, it was also because of this quick temper flaring up. The instant in which I cannot check that middle class sense of justice. It's a lethal flaw in a catcher. Also something of an extremely bad disadvantage in life.

I've slapped this beautiful face in front of me with a *pak*.

It was a great *pak*. The sound and angle were both quite good. It was a solid hit that would've gone beyond a single base, but the damage to the enemy is immeasurable. As evidence of that, he's staring at me in dumbfounded surprise. He's not even preparing for a counterattack. It's become so quiet around us that you could've heard a pin drop, and Wolfram's left cheek is reddening where I hit him. And not just his left cheek, but the right one as well—and his forehead, his eyes...



Conrad stands so quickly that his chair crashes over. Now *his* face is changing color.

"Your Majesty, take it back—please take that back immediate—"

"No way!"

Lady Cäli sets her knife slowly down on her plate. Günter almost topples forward as he comes running.

"I'm not gonna take it back and I'm not gonna apologize! He said and did something he shouldn't have! He can make a fool of me and abuse me all he likes—I don't care about that! But calling someone's mother, someone he hasn't even met, a harlot?! Mongrel bitch? What the hell is with that? Can a dog and a person give birth to a kid? My mom's human! She's human however you look at her. A human with what you call filthy blood running through her! Who the hell do you think you are? What the hell do you mean by humans being dirty? If I talked like that about your mother, how would you feel? No way, I'm totally not apologizing!"

This is the way my temper-tantrums always are: BayStar wave-like machine-gun objections. I continue, overriding Günter, "I am absolutely not taking that back! And I even held myself back and slapped him instead of punching him because he has a pretty face!"

"So you're absolutely not taking it back?" When I nod determinedly, Lady Cäli claps her hands in delight. "How wonderful! Then the match^[1] is established!"

Match?

The kind that you strike against a rock and use to light a campfire with?

"There, see, Wolfram? I told you, didn't I? That you're so beautiful that the gentlemen can't

leave you alone."

The tips of her fingers are pressed together in delight—she seems ready to dance for joy.

By gentlemen she means...me?!

"Though His Majesty is so cute that I'm just a bit jealous. But I guess it can't be helped, since it's for the sake of my beloved son."

"Wait a minute, calm down, I mean, someone calm me down. Can somebody tell me what's going on here? Have I breached some kind of etiquette again? Can somebody explain to me in words of one syllable?"

My favorite tutor hangs his head, looking completely crestfallen as if to say "Oh dear..."

"...You have not breached any etiquette. On the contrary, you have invoked an ancient, elegant tradition that is no longer in use even among the nobles. Your Majesty has just proposed to him."

"Proposed? Not—"

"An offer of marriage."

Marriage?! You're not allowed to get married to a girl before you're eighteen, Japanese boy. There's no problem with an engagement, but Wolfram isn't even a girl!

"Ma-ma-ma-marriage?! A man with a man? And I'm the one who proposed? When the hell did I do that?"

"To hit someone's left cheek with the palm of your hand is a proposal of marriage among nobles. And if that person presents their right cheek, then they have accepted."

"Uwah, that's insane! A-and we're both guys. We're both guys!"

"It is not so unusual."

Holy crap, I just proposed to the guy who insulted my mother?! So it's not a matchstick or tinder that's being ignited, but the love of a celebrity couple?^[2] Or is it the birth of a royal couple rather than a celebrity couple?

Günter is sobbing. I don't want to consider if they're tears of joy or something else.

"Yo-Your Majesty, I am struck speechless. Your sudden proposal of marriage is...no, I should be delighted. Now Your Majesty will surely settle in as king of this country..."

"Someone, tell me that doing this between guys is weird!"

"Did you think that I'll allow you to humiliate me like this?!" Wolfram, who seems to have finally come back to himself, shouts. He doesn't look like he has any intention of offering his right cheek.

"It's not like I could help it! No one explained to me that I should make a fist when I hit people!"

"Shut up! This is the first time in my life that I've been so humiliated!"

"Huh, really. You must've had a really charmed life, then. There was the time the junior who stole my position told me to wash my socks, and the time I was designated the slowest stealer on the team—that was much more humiliating! You've lived for eighty years, and you won't even forgive one mistake by someone else?"

Wolfram, still excited by the marriage proposal, maybe, sweeps his hand across the table. Plates and cups fall to the floor, and a silver knife lands at my feet.

"Uwah, that was really dangerous! Stop attacking the dinner!"

"Your Majesty, don't pick—"

I squat and pick up the knife, greasy with chicken fat.

"So you picked it up, huh?"

Eh?

I look around from my crouched position. Conrad and Günter are holding their heads, looking like they're at their wits' end, while the pretty boy who dropped the knife in the first place gives me a faint smile, still twitching with rage.

"So you picked it up. Fine, the time will be noon tomorrow, weapons and arena of your choice. If you won't even step onto the battlefield, then you're a coward who can't even ride a horse properly. But do at least wear good armor so you'll present some challenge."

"Wh-what?"

"Prepare yourself—I'm going to tear you apart."

Then he smiles cruelly and makes his exit after apologizing to his mother and eldest brother for walking out in the middle of a meal. The mostly useless tutor sighs as his shoulders slump.

"You accept a challenge to a duel immediately after proposing. Your Majesty, oh Your Majesty, I cannot follow your shifts in mood!"

"Challenged? To a duel? I was?"

"Purposely dropping a knife is a silent challenge to a duel, and if the one who is challenged picks it up, it means that he has accepted."

"Duel?! So, then if I lose—and I'll probably lose—wi-will I die?! Is he going to beat me up and kill me just for politely, carelessly, inadvertently picking up a knife?"

My spindly powers of imagination can only call up a scene from a spaghetti Western, of quick-draw gunmen walking ten paces away from each other in the western wilds in a cloud of dancing sand, then turning and shooting at each other.

It's all right, people rarely take each other's life in duels nowadays; why don't you pick an

odd weapon that Wolfram would never imagine to surprise him; how about dressing up in some really cute costume that will instantly deprive him of his will to fight? As I look at the two who are in "my faction" quarreling and consoling the new king, Gwendal and Madame Căli, who have been completely silently up until now, begin talking as they finish their drinks.

"I've always thought of him as someone who has trouble controlling his emotions...but I didn't think that he would be so impulsive."

"That's true, I would never have imagined that he would propose a duel."

As soon as I calm down a bit, I realized that they're treating the marriage proposal quite casually. Since I was raised in another world, I'm a returnee who doesn't even know his right from his left yet. I don't think they'll expect me to know Mazoku (nobility, even) traditions.

"But not all of the fault is his."

"What do you mean?" Gwen asks with a side glance at me.

I have a bad feeling about this. When mothers giggle like that, they're usually hiding something.

"Well, actually, teeheehe, I could smell my orchid perfume from His Majesty's hair. I left some of it in the bathroom, blended with shampoo. He must have washed his hair with it, not knowing its effects."

"And those effects are...?"

"I asked a potions master to make it for me—it's a precious substance that only works on Mazoku. If you bear even a tiny bit of good will towards the person wearing it, it'll make you become much more daringly passionate."

"So it's something like an aphrodisiac or a love potion?"

"Aww, that's such a crude way of putting it."

A person bearing good will becomes more daring. Then what of someone bearing ill will?

Gwendal's brows crease a bit as he signals a waiter to pour more wine. "The person who hates you will become even more aggressive...meaning that it threw Wolfram into a frenzy. Mother, you should have told us something like this sooner."

"Oh, but why? Wolfram's angry face is so cute. Is there any mother who doesn't want to see their children at their more adorable?"

"...No."

"Of course! Why don't you test it out when you're with Anissina too?"

"...I still value my life..."

I listen dumbfounded to their conversation in the same way I would listen to a stream of English coming out of a radio.

The person bearing ill will becomes more aggressive. The person bearing good will becomes more daring.

I get it, so that's why Günter's been tearing up.

footnotes

[1] The Japanese pun is "kyuukon", which means "marriage proposal/courtship" as well as "(plant) bulb"

[2] Continuing the pun from earlier, in Japanese Yuuri says "So it's not a tulip or hyacinth that's blooming, but the love of a celebrity couple".

Chapter 5

I'm about to start bawling.

I can't believe it, how could this happen? Slapping someone is proposing to them, picking up a knife is accepting a duel?! My common sense says that it's red roses for a proposal and a glove for a duel! I'm now standing at the crossroads of life and death just because I didn't know this world's etiquette.

"Aaaaaaaaaaagh!"

The castle's bed is so huge that I don't fall off even though I'm rolling around. So huge that I feel lonely. For the first time in my fifteen years of existence I understand why girls sleep with stuffed animals.

"What do I do? How do I get out of this one?!"

I try to calm myself by thinking of worse pinches I've been in. Searching: more extreme crisis situations...no data found.

"I haven't done anything as dangerous as this! This is not normal! This dueling thing!"

Calm down, calm down, calm down, calm down. How about I hurt myself before I'm beat up by the enemy?

An anguished Günter told me earlier with eyes and nose running that deciding the winner of a duel by the loser's death went out of fashion hundreds of years ago. Duels nowadays are merely a matter of pride, and it's very rare for someone to actually lose their life.

Yes, rare.

There are exceptions.

I unconsciously tuck the pillow behind my legs and groan loudly, "What am I gonna do?" As if in response, a knock comes from the thick door.

"Your Majesty."

"What?"

Conrad enters carrying a pile of various things.

"Good, you're not asleep yet. Your Majesty, what is that between your legs?"

"Huh? Oh, this, it kinda calmed me down—I couldn't sleep at all."

"Not surprisingly. I thought that that might be the case, which is why I brought these. Here, Your Majesty, let's practice."

"Practice?"

He's brought a leather tray and a pole—the tray becomes a shield when I grip its back, and the pole a practice sword when I draw it from its scabbard.

"Hold the sword with your dominant arm—yes, this is a one-handed sword, so your left arm carries a light shield. Try swinging it. How does it feel? Please tell me if it's too heavy. Though I did intentionally chose a shorter sword made for women."

It's a bit heavy to swing with one hand. The grip on this simple, dull silver weapon feels very much like something else that I'm more accustomed to holding.

"The hilt feels a lot like a bat, doesn't it. But the weight is more like a pro wooden bat than a metal bat."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed. A bat, hmm? That's probably true."

It's already been so long since I last played baseball. I haven't even touched ball or bat or mask or mitt for a very long time.

"It really brings back memories, this grip. I guess it'll be a year soon, huh?"

"Why did you quit?"

"Eh?"

"Baseball," Conrad asks with his arms folded, a cheerful smile on his face. I drop the sword in my lap and fall back onto the bed.

Nostalgic memories. Memories that no longer make me mad, but still make my chest ache a little.

"...My temper exploded like it did earlier, and I hit the coach. I got kicked out immediately."

"That's the reason you quit the team, right? I'm not asking about the team, but about why you stopped playing baseball."

"I stopped because...I wonder why? I can't really explain it clearly myself, I guess."

"Then maybe you haven't stopped yet?"

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that maybe you're not done yet?"

A round object appears in Conrad's palm as if he were Santa Claus or a magician. Its leather is yellow with use, its red stitches worn.

"Woah, it's a ball! Hey, what an awesome discovery! Baseball in this world is just like baseball in Japan!"

"Want to give it a try? To see if the feeling is the same or not?"

The courtyard is enclosed by buildings on all sides; soft light pours out of every window. There's a moon in the sky, and brilliantly flaming torches illuminate a yellow semi-circle on the ground.

Sentries guarding critical positions serve as our only audience. But.

"It feels like a nighter."

"Nighter? Aah, night game?"

"That term exists in this world too? Do you play baseball at night anywhere?"

"Not really. Well, actually, there are very few people who play baseball...truth to tell, the children and I are the only people who are interested in it..."

Conrad has brought his personal gloves. They're normal gloves, not mitts. Well, you take what you can get, I murmur as I touch the outside with my index finger, and test-grip the hard brown leather. Though the model is somewhat outdated, it's an almost-new baseman-use glove. My favorite is the Zett role model design, but this one isn't a Mizuno or a Descente. Of course it's not going to be a brand I recognize, since this isn't even my world. Except that this familiar boomerang is...

"...Nike...no way."

Conrad waves exaggeratedly from more than ten meters away.

"Your Majesty, here it comes!"

The ball lands solidly in the glove as I hold it up diagonally across my face. The sensation of leather smacking against leather is peculiar. The shock concentrated in the center of my palm seems to throb from there down to my elbow.

"Hard ball, huh?"

That's what it is. But it's electrifying; I've always played soft ball until now.

I shift the grip of my right hand on the ball, which is surprisingly smooth and difficult to hold onto. When I take a good look, I can see words written there in a script that is about to fade almost completely away. Of course I can't read Mazoku writing, but it's rather unexpectedly childish of him to write his name on the ball. I slowly pull my arm back and return the toss with a small snap. I over-estimate the distance, so it hits his glove with a good smack.

At night the temperature drops pretty dramatically, so even though it's spring, I can see my breaths in white puffs. Like that one scene in *Field of Dreams*, I take a look at his expression as we conscientiously continue our warm-up to make sure he's enjoying himself, and test the waters with, "Think I can try squatting?"

"Squatting?"

"Right, let's see, take six more steps back. There, good. Now throw the ball at me from there."

"That's too far, Your Majesty!"

"It's fine, I'm a senior high school student already! Come on, a straight pitch right down the center!"

I squat and dig my heels in. The ball that comes at me is a strong one-bounce, and I catch it at the level of my knees. The ball, thrown with truly terrible form, has considerable weight and speed.

"Who taught you to throw like that!"

I take a few running steps and toss the ball back, surprised by the careless positioning of his fingers.

"It gives you good speed, but from where and whom the heck did you learn that utter rubbish?"

"No one taught me. I just went to baseball games and felt it out for myself. I watched from so far away that I know nothing at all about things like grip or the finer points of throwing."

"There're games, but there's also practice, right? That's why there are coaches and students. Here, you hold the ball with three fingers like this, with your fingers on the horizontal seams."

"I see...ah, can you put any power into throwing the ball when you're holding it like this?"

"Of course—?! If you hold the ball that tightly, it'll have a hard time leaving your hand, right? So where did you go to games? Does this country have stadiums, too? Do the people of this country go have beer at night games with the Giants for amusement on Friday nights?"

"The Giants are a Minor League, so I don't know them very well...but Your Majesty, there is no baseball in this country. The games I went to weren't here," he replies vaguely as I tuck my glove under my arm and explain the grip to Conrad. Here, this is four-seam baseball, since the pitch is gripped across the seams, and you see four seams when the ball is thrown. I have more enthusiasm for teaching baseball than asking about the state of it in this country.

"Shift your weight for the windup? If you don't, your pivot leg won't be firmly planted. Focus your gaze on your target—don't look away from my mitt. Now, your stride should be short, but it'll be something you have to get a feel for yourself. Though your follow-through is oddly exaggerated..."

Explaining to him makes me feel rather happy. Shifting his fingers and shoulders along

with my explanations calls to mind my own childhood, stirring a warm feeling in my chest.

"...Was it like this?"

"Hmm?"

"I was just wondering if it was like this. For the person teaching me. When I was about ten, there was this one-day baseball training camp held by professional players. I was a crybaby catcher, but because of my dad's connections, or maybe because he won the lottery, I got to go."

Especially since I wasn't much to speak of either physically or mentally. I was an elementary school kid who was playing that position just because my dad chose it for me, and I was afraid of the fastballs and runners coming at me. I wore a mask, of course, but I was still afraid of things flying towards my face. I shamefully confessed everything to the slim professional catcher.

"I felt as if saying that I was scared meant that I had no aptitude for it. But he squatted me down and squatted down behind me, like this, sorta as if he were hugging me. Then he positioned my mitt and called to the pitcher."

The pro pitcher, who was more than 5'9", lifted his leg high and threw the ball from his blue glove into the air with his long fingers. Thinking about it now, it was unquestionably a super-slow lob. But even after the brand-new pure-white soft ball dove into my mitt, I was still crouched there in place, forgetting even to blink.

"And my teacher asked me over my shoulder, 'Where you scared?' But I already..."

"Looks like you can already catch a pro ball. So are you still scared of the junior players?"

As I look at Conrad's palm, I can recall the feel of the wind that day. There wasn't yet a roof. The sun shone directly on my cap.

"...I can't forget it, that sensation."

"The warmth of your teacher?"

"Not warmth, that's not it at all! And besides, I decided to make him my role model on my own, but I only got to talk to him that once, and I never even got his autograph!"

"But Your Majesty is...well, a fan of your teacher's team."

"Well, of course—?! The ringtone on my cell was the team song for a while, and I always watch their game broadcasts to the end, and I check for them on FM during the weekends, and I'm in their fan club and go to the stadium, too. It's now the fourth year that I've been keeping a scrapbook of news on the team, and my videos keep increasing and increasing...so who are you a fan of? What're the team names like here?"

Conrad folds his arms with a meaningful look.

"The Boston Red Sox."

"Red Sox?! Woah, Major League! So players like Orellano, Wolcott, Clark, and Rhodes of Kintetsu!"

"Who is he? I don't recognize the name."

"He's in the Pacific League...he's a player in my world who started out with the Red Sox. What, so this world has the same baseball team names? Well, that's true, there are actually Tigers and Giants in both Japan and America, Japanese-American baseball is so confusing, with the Cubs vs. the Giants, you can't tell the nationalities at all..."

"Since the Giants are a National League."

"Even the league names are the same? And place names like Boston...that can't be right, can it?"

Now that I think about it, he's a really odd guy. We're too much on the same wavelength. With the ball in my hand, I take a long hard look at Conrad's face. My grip unconsciously tightens so much that my index finger cramps.

"You understand everything that I can't get across to Günter, don't you? Like about merry-go-rounds and about my dad...and even the Red Sox...why is that? You said earlier that it isn't in this country, right? Then where? Which country in this world, which human society likes baseball? Where is there a Boston Red Sox?"

That can't.

"Where besides Massachusetts in America on Earth?!"

That can't be possible.

Conrad lifts both hands, still wearing his glove, and shakes his head *no*.

"Nowhere. Nowhere besides Massachusetts in America on Earth."

"Then, why—"

"Because I went there."

"Went—where? You went where?"

"Because I went to Boston."

To Boston?

"Not just Boston, all over. Washington, Staten Island, New Hampshire, Orlando, Quebec, Edinburgh, Wales, Dusseldorf, Cherbourg. I went to the world in which you were raised, carefully protecting Your Majesty's soul all the while."

A Traveler's Guide to the Earth, the guest-from-another-world edition.

"Seventeen years ago, while protecting Your Majesty's pure-white soul, which had been healed of all its wounds from its previous life, I went to the place where you were born, the United States of America. That's where I learned about the joys of baseball, and after making sure the future Maou was safely born, I came home. Your Majesty's mother is such a dauntless woman that she was shouting at the taxi driver even as you were about to be

born."

"No way...so you were the person riding with her, who gave me my name?!"

"Though I never imagined that she would end up using it..."

Then my fifteen years of being teased about Shibuya Yuuri Harajuku Furi is about twenty percent his fault? The remaining part is largely my parents' fault, since they chose the Chinese characters.



"If that's true, then I met you when I was in my mom's stomach?"

"You could say that."

Can this strange story really be true? This man, who doesn't seem to have aged at all since meeting my mother fifteen years ago, who was destined to be the one to name me, is standing with a smile right in front of me. And he's calling me Your Majesty.

"I've been waiting for fifteen years."

He takes off his glove and tucks it under his arm, then envelops my hand, still holding the ball, with his.

"For the day when I would be able to meet Your Majesty face to face."

My left brain is picking something like 'thank you' or 'let me express my gratitude to you on behalf of my mother' out of its orthodox conversation stock, but he's standing in front of me with such a human expression on his face that my right brain wins the fight, and I can only say, "...Stop calling me Your Majesty, since you're the guy who named me."

"Yuuri."

That's right, since it's the name you gave me! But even so, I have to continue in a falsetto to hide my embarrassment. Because it's rather touching, and makes me uncharacteristically emotional.

"And stop talking like we're brothers separated at birth! Since we pretty much only met yesterday! You probably knew my name, but I never heard anything except that you were riding together with my mother! Well, but if you'd had your name written on your luggage or something, my mom would probably have remembered! Here, like this."

I thrust the ball in my hand at him.

"Like having a baseball with the owner's name written on it."

"...That's not my name."

What?

"I bought the gloves myself because I wanted to take them home with me, but I got the ball at the baseball stadium. I didn't really ask for it, but one of the junior players on the visiting team said that he'd sign it and pretty much nabbed it out of my hand, then..."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's wrong with you?! You're playing catch with me with a ball signed by one of the great Major League players?! Who-who signed it?!"

The script is so faded that I can't make it out even though I now know that it's English. What if it's a god of the Majors?

"Oh, could he be more celebrated than Your Majesty?"

"Wh-wh-wh of course?! I was a bench-warmer for three years, and I'm too intimidated to even try for Koushien, and even that's no match for the pros. ...So you said that baseball hasn't spread much yet in this world, right?"

"Actually, the spread is just myself and the children."

"So that means that right now I'm the best of the best top player? I'll definitely be a starter in the game? Can I be called the Ichirou of Shinma Kingdom? Oh, but my position is catcher—argh, what do I do? How about the Next-Generation Itou, then?"

"Most certainly—and in Your Majesty's case, not only that, but player, coach, manager, referee, and owner. The owner of a state-managed team would have to be the king, wouldn't it?"

"The king! If it's the king, then the Maou would be okay, too, right?"

Conrad's light brown eyes meet mine, and they narrow as he says, "I'm glad, Your Majesty, that you seem a bit more cheerful."

I'm not cheerful, Conrad. But I feel like I'm about to have some ideas that haven't quite made an appearance yet.

"Yeah, so since I'm king, how about I make baseball the national sport? We could build a Shibuya Yuuri Commemorative Stadium, and hold the first Shibuya Cup Championship Tournament!"

Something flashes across my mind.

Chapter 6

A bird flies across the sky.

As I open the window to take in deep breaths of the unpolluted morning air, the bird with the sapphire-blue wings and long orange tail crosses right near the balcony. A pretty bird with a awful cry of 'baaad omen!'

Apparently breakfast can be taken on one's own, and I cram down the bread and cheese brought to my room until I'm totally stuffed. The only time when quantity trumps quality is when it comes to sports food. I'd rather have all-you-can-eat 100-yen sweet buns over the highest grade malt bread. Besides, last night's rare steak wasn't enough fuel at all.

As I'm inhaling enough staple foods for about three people, a disheartened Günter appears. His hair and clothes are perfectly groomed as usual, but there are dark circles under his reddened eyes. I lift my right hand at him in greeting as I add milk to my fourth cup of black tea. "Morning."

"Good morning, Your Majesty. You appear to be in high spirits, and that is more important than anything."

"You appear to be in low spirits. You look like you didn't get enough sleep last night."

"Yes, I was thinking...of today's duel, and though I lay awake until dawn, I could not come up with a good plan...."

"About that—I've been thinking a bit about it too."

It was the only strategy I could come up with after pummeling my brain over the problem. If I'm still defeated, then there will have been no event in which I could have won; you could call it my ultimate weapon.

"I wonder if Conrad's up? There's something I want to borrow from him."

"He went out early this morning saying that he needed to get some supplies, but he should be back before noon. But anyway, Your Majesty, what are you planning to do? Wolfram is more delicate than his two older brothers, but despite appearances, he is also quite skilled at the sword. He inherited fire-magic from his mother's blood, and is one of the kingdom's leading practitioners. To challenge him in a careless manner would be..." Günter chokes. He sounds more pained than the actual participant.

"You don't have to look so serious. I mean, you said yesterday that people rarely die, right?"

"I did, yes, I did say that, but..."

"No matter how I look at it, there's no way I can fight with either sword or magic, so I'm not going to use them in the match. That means I need tactics—yup, tactics. I have to out-smart him."

"Then what in the world will you use for arms...?"

In the blink of an eye the sun advances overhead, and some wind instrument announces noon. I tinker with my analog G-Shock to have it match the time. I waste a bit of time doing it, then hurry out of the room, accompanied by Günter. I still have something to borrow from Conrad, who's returned from the city.

When I emerge as promised into the courtyard, the sentries have been reduced to a minimum, and the inward-facing windows have been shut—guess they don't want details of this private match leaked out. Madam Cäli is encamped in a box seat in the balcony, and she smiles and waves when she spots me. Gwendal is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, and my opponent in this duel, Wolfram, is reclining arrogantly in a chair.

Since he's an edgy guy, he'll be pretty irritated at having to wait on an opponent. The irritation will disturb his concentration—it's called the great 'I've been waiting for you, Musashi!' strategy. It's really quite petty.

"I've been imagining you blubbering and begging me for mercy after I beat you to a pulp. Such thoughts make even waiting sweet."

Guess he's not very irritated at all. Miyamoto Musashi Strategy: massive failure.

"It's not like I'll lose for sure. Maybe this duel will awaken the instinct for hand-to-hand combat that's been sleeping inside me for fifteen years."

Oh dang, now I'm irritated. Calm down, calm down.

I draw a circle with wax on the stone pavement, then start making preparations on the outside. Wolfram's face changes color.

"Why are you taking off your clothes?!"

"What're you talking about? Take yours off, too."

"Me?!"

"Yeah. In sumo wrestling your uniform is your 'bare skin'."

That's why I borrowed new underwear from Conrad. The common people wear trunks, but apparently the rich people and the aristocrats wear thongs like that thing from earlier to show off their status. Wolfram the gung-ho aristocrat is almost certainly in the thongs faction. Not that I want to see him in his underwear, but something as flimsy as that should be easy to get off in a bout. The match'll be in the bag if I can do that. In the arena, the wrestler who's stripped loses on the spot. That's totally a legit rule.

"Sumo is the super heavyweight martial art where men face each other in their loincloths. If you take even one step out of this sumo ring, or touch the ground with any part of your body except for the soles of your feet, you lose. It's a sport with a long honorable history!"

"Sumo? Sumo ring?"

Even Günter in the Yuuri camp is bewildered. Only Conrad understands: "Aaah, Japanese sumo wrestling, hmm?" He probably heard a bit about it when he was in America.

"So hurry up and strip."

"Men face each other na-na-na-naked?!"

"Yup. Leaping bodies, flying sweat."

"Don't mess with me! You're challenging me to a contest that barbaric and indecent?!"

"Indecent? That's pretty rude, calling Japan's national sport indecent! It's a lot better than trying to kill each other, isn't it?"

Lady Cäli waves exaggeratedly from the balcony.

"I loooooove this contest!"

She throws us an ardent kiss.

"...No help for it, I guess. You can keep your cloths on. Hurry up and get into the ring."

Maybe he thinks now it'll just be an ordinary boxing contest—Wolfram struts arrogantly inside. Without the normal ceremony or announcement, I also cross the line, having taken off only my upper clothes.

"You won't get it even if I try to explain about things like 'miatte hakkeyoi', so...let's take that bugle from earlier as the start signal. This'll be a decisive fight, all right?—
er...Wolfram...san."

I'm a total chicken. I can't even drop the honorific when I address him.

Instructions are hurriedly passed to the watchtower, and a sonorous "commence!" sounds.

I'm crouched low from the start, so I move forward quickly; my thrust takes Wolfram in his unguarded waist. I grasp his belt as a substitute for the sumo wrestler's loincloth. The match is decided in an instant. We don't even have time to grapple.

"Uryaa!"

"...!"

Though I had no intention of taking him off his feet, the enemy tumbles backwards to the ground.

"...Huh?"

The sky is a clear unclouded blue directly above the handsome youth sprawled stupidly in the dirt with his mouth hanging half-open in complete incomprehension of what's just happened. I can sympathize, maybe because I felt the same way the day before yesterday? The Wolfram who in his daze has forgotten all about hatred and hostility looks more like an angel deceived by a demon than a Mazoku elite. Whatever, this is no time for

sympathy. My true feelings slowly surge out of me. Can it be that I actually...won? According to the rules of sumo, if any part of the body...if any part other than the soles of the feet hits the ground...

"Woo! I won, right?! I won!"

The wrestling umpire's fan says: YOU WIN.

"I won I won I won I won—! Oomph."

"You Majesty! What a splendid fight that was!"

Günter, who's already crying, loses his composure and clings to me like a limpet.

"So my strategy won! Brains brains brains, if you don't use this thing up here—"

"This duel born of Your Majesty's benevolence, in which neither party spills a drop of blood, will be legendary among our legends and handed down through the generations."

"I have a feeling it'll be told as a comic story rather than a legend."

"It's fine either way if it settles matters," Conrad, the one person who seems calm, murmurs while extending a hand to his younger brother, who's still sitting where he fell. The vanquished one's white skin reddens in the blink of an eye, and he brushes his brother's hand away.

"How can such stupid contests really exist?!"

"Wolfram."

"We're deciding matters based on another world's game?!"

I lose whatever sympathy I had for him. He hasn't learned anything at all. It looks like humiliation has poured oil on the fire of his anger and burned away even the reality of his defeat.

"Look, you! You want to be king of this country, don't you?! Then fight as we do! If you're the Maou, then fight a Mazoku duel as the Maou would!"

"Wait a minute, didn't you say that we could fight any way I wanted to? So now that you've lost—what? At least try to show a little class in the face of defeat. This isn't very manly of you."

"Shut up! Someone, bring me my sword."

One of the soldiers comes running. I'm so panicked that even my voice gets all jumbled.

"Hey hey hey, wait, wait a minute, seriously wait! We could die if we fought using a real sword like that!! Stop being all serious just because you lost!"

"So that means you weren't serious in that worthless contest just now?"

"Stop calling it worthless—!"

This is starting to sound more and more like a married couple comedy. Günter tries to mediate.

"Wolfram, was the duel not by the terms you presented? I will not stand idly by if you press your selfish demands further."

"So what will you do? Take up the duel in his place? The man calling himself the new Maou is going to rely on his underlings for a one-on-one match?"

Even while I'm thinking that he's an ass with a comeback for everything, a strange calculation that I've never seen in myself before begins in a part of me separated from my emotions. Where is this sagacity bubbling up from?—I don't even know whether it's the left side or the right side of my brain that's doing it. Just that before I realize it, these eyes looking around me...no, I'm not even clearly conscious of having changed. Without taking my eyes off my opponent in this duel, I ask Conrad, standing beside me, "If I become the Maou—ah, I'm saying *if*. *If* by any chance that happens, will he be one of my allies?"

"Of course." Conrad nods firmly. It's not just because Wolfram is his younger brother.

"What kind of a guy is he? Would he stab me in the back out of hatred and resentment?"

"No."

"Then he's the type who can work with even someone he hates for the greater goal?"

"When it comes to Wolfram, I believe that he will agree to compromise in the end if it's done for the sake of the Mazoku, no matter how much he may dislike the other party. He has much pride in being Mazoku. And he wants the Mazoku to continue standing at the summit of this world. He would obey even someone he hates if he recognizes that such is their intent."

"Huh, I see."

"May I add one thing more, about Gwen? He loves this kingdom more than anyone. He is more earnest than even I. But his love and devotion are directed only at the Mazoku and Shinma Kingdom." He seems to be holding in some aching wound. "...And that is the problem."

If I'm to believe those words, then Wolfram is my ally. Though we're fighting an intrasquad battle against each other now, one day he'll be on my team. My calculations are consistent with my feelings.

"All right, let me borrow that practice sword. He won't be satisfied until I do this, so the only thing I can do is get it over with as quickly as I can."

His wounded pride won't recover unless we go at it with real swords.

"I'm a total newbie at the sword, so I have no chance of winning. But even if I lose this round, we'll draw at one win one loss each. Since I never had any chance in this duel anyway, coming out even would still be pretty good, right?"

If we can declare a ceasefire at a draw, then there won't be quarreling within the team.

"I thought that it might come to this."

Conrad hands the sword and shield leaning against the wall to me and calls Günter. Then with a clever word from the elders, the other side's weapons are exchanged for practice-use ones as well.

"Your Majesty, please set your mind at ease. Though their size may cause them to look quite intimidating, in actuality they have no edge and cannot cut through anything. Your head may cave in if you are hit there, but they cannot gouge out your heart."

"Having your cranium cave in would bring you pretty close to heaven, I think..."

Conrad unfastens two of his shirt's buttons and pulls out the cord hanging from his neck. Attached to it is a silver-edged round stone about the size of a 500-yen coin.

"Your Majesty, here."

It's a blue deeper and darker than the sky overhead.

"That's lions' blue, isn't it?"

"It's something a...friend of mine gave to me. I had heard that it's a type of charm, but when I inquired in the city this morning, I was told that since it is a magical stone by nature, only someone with magical powers of their own would be able to use it. Though it can be useful for anything, from luck to defense or offense."

"You're giving it to me?"

"Yes."

The tutor force-clears his throat and cuts in, "Please use caution when you take anything. Though Your Majesty may have no such intentions, to accept someone's offering means that you accept their loyalty as well. It doesn't matter for me or Conrad, but please do not add to your circle of loyal retainers in strange places."

"So don't accept things carelessly? Geez, it's just like an election, huh?"

The part of the stone lying against my chest is slightly warm. Rather than some kind of miracle, it feels like sitting on a toilet seat warmed by the body heat of the previous occupant. I stand up against the hard, gray earth with the sword I held for the first time last night in my right hand, the shield in my left.

Wolfram, shield-less, has a double-handed grip on his sword. He aims it at me like Ichiro in the batter's box.

"I wonder if that's really a practice sword..."

It's actually a really lively scabbard fish. Or maybe frozen salted salmon. One blow from something like he's brandishing about and you'd get an out-of-the-stadium home run. I'm backing away before I've started.

"I'm p-planning to cry uncle as soon as possible, but if I'm clobbered and can't speak, throw in the towel for me quick."

"What's cry uncle? What's throw in the towel?"

Conrad unexpectedly adopts an American manner: "Roger that, Yuuri."

"Are you done with your preparations, Other-Worlder?!"

Stop coming up with stuff like that, that's no way to refer to someone.

"My name is Shibuya Yuuri. You can add *Lord* to that if you like."

"Stop messing with me!"

The match abruptly begins. Wolfram rushes me, brandishing the frozen salmon, and takes a big swing at me. My reflexes drop me straight down, and I bring up the shield to cover my middle. The impact is like being hit with an iron ball, and the shock travels all the way through my body. The outfield shouts frantically.

"Your Majesty, please step out of the way, step out of the way! It's too dangerous for you to take him straight-on!"

"Stop giving him unnecessary advice, Günter. Someone untrained would end up with broken bones on the first blow if he took it on his arms alone. Though it's probably instinctive, His Majesty's judgment is correct."

It's nothing so rational as judgment—simply the habit of many years. Just: take it with the front of your body; even if you drop it, make sure it falls in front of you; never let it pass you. After all, it's the job of someone playing in my position.

He strikes again immediately without even giving me time for a return toss. Another straight from above. The shield can't absorb the entire blow, and my left arm and elbow and shoulder go numb. Another from the right, again from above.

"Well? What are you carrying a sword for?! Your right arm is hanging useless! Or are you so scared that you can't even move it?"

"Shut up!"

Calm down, don't get irritated, Shibuya Yuuri.

The heavy iron weapon comes right at me. It sketches a glittering silver line in the midday sun. Be calm—hurting arms—keep your balance—keep your center of gravity low—don't blink—no time—bend forward—take the opening as he turns for the blow—in kendo terms that'd be face, face, torso—sweat coming into my eyes—face, face, torso—stinging.

I'm not afraid. But it's still scary having the thing coming straight at my face—blows from above—you can already...

You can already catch a pro ball. So are you still scared of the junior players?

Just like that day.

Once again there's no roof.

I'm no longer afraid.

"Your speed is nothing to be afraid of."

"What did you say?!"

I boldly toss aside the shield, destroying my opponent's stance. I take the opportunity to grip the hilt of the sword with both hands and swing it protectively in front of me.

"Aaah, he threw away the shield. Aaah, I can't watch anymore, Conrart. Hurry up and toss the owl or towel or whatever it is."

"Not yet. His Majesty is reading Wolfram's rhythm. Though his offensive rudiments are exemplary, that also means that one can read the course for his next strike. There, it was a near thing, but His Majesty stopped the sword. And besides, I didn't bring any towels."

"Eeeeh?!"

As Conrad pointed out, I read the spot he was targeting next. But it's not because of his rudiments or exemplars, but because I understand my enemy's personality.

He eats in sequential order, without any deviation at all. And he's been coming at me with the same rhythm. Pitching that never varies will get broken, and eventually the other team will get a home run. This is the same thing.

Metal clashes right in front of my face, and though sparks fly, I hold steady. The numbing vibration travels right down to my pinkie at the end of the hilt.

"...If I were your coach, I'd totally farm you out, 'cause your timing's been the same ever since we started! Having such an unaccomplished pitcher would be...!"

Recovering from a side blow should take him several fractions of seconds longer. I pull back my right foot and shoulder at the same time, square my posture, and bring my sword down to a forty-five degree angle.

Dig back, time the movement of your left foot to when your opponent steps back, put your strength in your thumb when your bat—no, when your blade strikes his blade, and never draw back—but don't rush your swing, and with the axis of your body fixed—

"...!"

—Swing through to the end!

The clang sounds like the familiar ring of a metal bat. Both my arms hurt violently right down to the shoulders. The vibration from the shock gradually travels throughout my body to my ribs and hips like Morse code.

Wolfram's gigantic weapon goes flying and stabs into the ground with a muffled thud.

"....Woohooo!"

I feel like I've suddenly scored a home run with all bases loaded, but it'd be more like a two-base run from the distance. Either way, the enemy is unarmed, so now I have to find some kind of compromise to call a cease-fire.

"...I'm totally worn out, so I feel like I should ask you to cut me some slack. If it's all right with you, why don't we just call it a draw for today...uwaaah!"

I leap back, horrified. Wolfram's face is pale. His hand is curled as if he were holding a basketball, with the middle finger pointed slightly outward. Sitting in it is an orange fireball.

"Wolfram!" Günter shouts, "His Majesty has not yet been given any instruction in Majutsu! To use your forte in Fire Sorcery just because you lost would be—"

"I never lost!"

"I-I told you, let's just call it a draw."

"No draws either! We're continuing until one of us can't fight anymore."

His beautiful face distorted by hatred, the Mazoku prince thrusts out his right hand.

Günter shouts some kind of incantation, but the only thing that happens is a small explosion going off above their heads. They seem to be fighting in some way that ordinary me can't even begin to understand.

"Gwendal! Why are you interfering?! If I don't stop Wolfram, his Majesty will be—"

"*You* are the one interfering. This is a good opportunity to ascertain the truth. If that is the true Maou, he will not be beaten by the likes of Wolfram."

"But His Majesty has not yet created a covenant with the elements..."

"Magical power is—" Gwendal interrupts, stepping away from the wall and turning. The usual ill-humored beauty. "Magical power is intrinsic to the soul. It cannot be obtained through study or desire. If that is the true Maou, he will need pursue neither covenant nor knowledge to have every element obey him. They will kneel to that noble soul."

That's all I hear of that far-out conversation. I've run out of time. Even if I'm the true Maou—no, if by any small chance that's true, playing fire-dodgeball is a bit outside of my...

"O particles of flame, obey ye the Mazoku who slew the Soushu, one and all!"

If I can remember those lines, maybe something good will come out of it in the distant future. Now's not the time. I break into a run. Run away, run! There will be time for a counteroffensive, but right now, get away as far as you can to where that fireball can't reach!

"Read my will and obey me!"

It's quite by accident that I fall forward. But the gigantic fireball skims over my head and hits the wall. The peculiar disgusting smell of burnt hair assaults my nose.

I'm gonna be killed. If I'm hit with that, I'll be dead as dead!

Why? Why me? I made up my mind to go with them until the END mark is in sight, but then why am I gonna be foully murdered by these scientifically impossible flames?

Conrad draws his sword and points its silver tip at Gwendal.

"Gwen, cast a barrier. If you don't, I will kill you—I'll stop Wolfram even if it means killing you."

"Even if it means killing me? Just how serious are you, Conrart?"

"I am completely serious."

Wolfram seems that serious, too. This time it's not a fireball; the air begins to shimmer with the slight bend of his middle finger. A reddish light the color of blood glows at the tips of his fingers, then suddenly becomes a beast as big as a wolf. Still flaming.

"What the hell is that?!"

Wolfram releases the ferocious beast with a cruel smile.

What the hell? What good were the sumo wrestling and sword victories?! If there was going to be this last challenge, what good was everything I went through before?!

The beast covers the distance that I've desperately sprinted in three bounds, and I can only stand there staring at it. I can't move. Because no matter how much I dodge or run, those four legs will probably catch up with me. My mouth hangs stupidly open, more with a feeling of 'I can't believe this' than fear.

I suddenly duck my head just before the forefeet of the dangerous weapon strikes me. It skims over its prey, and the force of its jump carries it unstoppably forward. Towards what should have been a wall.

Unfortunately, there's a corridor there, and someone crossing it at a trot. I twist my neck so fast it hurts, shouting a warning at her. She looks familiar—it must be the girl who brought me my clothing yesterday.

"Watch out!"

"...Ah!"

All of us are too late. Günter and Conrart and I.

The still-burning beast dashes straight ahead, and the girl is sent tumbling without even a scream. The wolf disappears at the same time. The wrong target has been knocked down.

"...Is this—"

A nearby sentry hurriedly rushes over. A part of my right ribcage aches sharply, as if it were broken. It hurts to breathe, and my heart beats low and heavy in my ears.

"...Is this what you consider a match?!"

From the depths of my body, somewhere not the hips or stomach, a hot sensation spreads. It runs through all the way to the tips of my nerves, and an alarm sounds in the back of my head.

"To involve a girl who's entirely unrelated—this...?!"

Pure white smoke disperses before me.

I can't tell if she's still alive.

Inside my ears, someone murmurs in a low voice.

At last...

At last, what?

That's when my consciousness...

Chapter 7

The clear sky suddenly grows overcast with black clouds concentrated directly above the courtyard. A heavy rain strikes so hard upon the pavement that it makes breathing difficult. In the reflection of their barely-opened eyes, Yuuri stands gazing at Wolfram.

"...Your Majesty?" Günter ventures timidly, but Yuuri doesn't even turn to look at him.

His tone—even his voice—seems to belong to another person.

"You refuse to accept your defeat, flouting the rules and engaging in reckless behavior. In the end you involve an innocent girl—yet you covet a victory still."

"Wh-what are you talking about? And what's with that pretentious tone!"

"Is this what you call a true duel?! If that is the case, I cannot allow one such as you to continue unchecked! The spilling of blood is not my intention, but you leave me with no other choice—I will cut you down!"

"What?!"

Though he may have said 'cut', Yuuri's weapon is not the sword.

"Judgment!"



Like Wolfram's fire-beast, magic materializes from the tips of his fingers and takes the form of two fanged snakes of the same water-blue as the striking rain.

"How do I put this?—that, well, doesn't look very kingly."

"Putting that aside, whenever did His Majesty form a covenant with the elements of water? And controlling the particles without speaking even a word of command is next to impossible. How is he doing this without being taught anything at all...?"

As if he doesn't hear the two members of the Yuuri Faction putting forth their unsolicited opinions, Gwendal murmurs softly, "So I see—this proves the soul is genuine?"

The flanks of the glistening, half-transparent snakes wriggling in midair hazily form the characters for 'justice'. Complete incongruity. They unerringly coil around their Mazoku prey. Wolfram lets out an un-Wolfram-like scream and struggles to break free. Flame blazes from his fingertips again and again at his command, but is snuffed out by the heavy rain each time: evidence of the Water Sorcerer's strength over the Fire Sorcerer. Victory and defeat of elemental avatars in battle is decided by the capacity and power of the summoner.

"Let me go, damn you! How are you suddenly... What the hell are you?!"

"What am I? Do you still not recognize my face?"

They've now completely entered historical-drama mode.

"Your egotism, which takes an innocent girl's life, must absolutely not be forgiven."

"Guh...!"

As the snakes (Justice No. 1 and No. 2) tighten their coils around Wolfram to carry out the punishment, a soldier shouts happily, "Ooooy! She's come around, her life's not in danger!"

In the man's arms, the girl has regained consciousness. She opens her eyes, moans softly, and brings her hand up to her face.

"...Why...am I..."

Yuuri and Wolfram both look at them. Wolfram does not attempt to justify himself. Kill me if you're going to kill me—humiliating as it is for him to be vanquished by this kid (who, sure, might be somewhat good-looking), he would rather go meet a soldier's manly death than fall to his knees and beg for his life.

But the water snakes coiled around him up to his head suddenly vanish as if they've evaporated. He drops weakly to the ground. Yuuri, his radiant, inhuman eyes blazing, points at Wolfram and declares, "Wolfram or some-such, take care to reform yourself hereafter! Even those above have compassion."

"Com...*compassion*?"

The self-proclaimed member of 'those above' crumbles into the muddy water with a loud splash.

Chapter 8

Someone's washed me. Someone's brought me to my room. Someone's put me to sleep on my bed. Someone's pulled the blankets over me.

And someone's whispering in my dreams.

Baseball? If you're going to play baseball, then be a catcher—if soccer, then...um...game-maker? Someone who gives instructions to the team, anyway. Coach would be best.

An elementary school student can't be the coach.

I guess so, that's too bad. Aaaall right, Yuuri, catcher it is. If you don't give the signal, the game doesn't start.

"...If I don't give the signal...the game doesn't..."

"Are you awake, Your Majesty?"

I can dimly see the white ceiling above me. The uber-beauty with the gray hair peers at me. He's smiling and biting his lip, his lilac eyes filled with tears, looking ready to burst out crying at any moment.

"...So...I'm dead?"

"Please do not say such inauspicious things. Right now everyone in the kingdom is concerned for Your Majesty's health and praying for your recovery."

"That's pretty exaggerated."

Günter draws back as if to say "Certainly not!"

"It is not exaggeration. You have been asleep for three days."

"Three days?!"

"Yes. But you entered into a normal sleep this morning, and the physicians said that you would awaken once you've recovered from your fatigue. Do you feel any sort of strangeness anywhere?"

"I thought so, but actually I'm just hungry."

Still, even though I got run down by a flame monster like *that* thing, I don't have any conspicuous injuries or burns. Maybe I'm actually made of pretty tough stuff, or did someone throw in the towel for me?

"But truly, when Your Majesty used Water Sorcery, you amazed not only me, but Gwen and Conrart as well. When did you form a covenant with the elements of water? And they were such beautiful, magnificent snake avatars. When in the world did..."

"Water Sorcery? Elements, covenant? What are you talking about? Oh, right, is that girl okay?! That girl who was hit by the burning wolf."

"Ah, yes, happily there was no danger to her life. Since Gwendal erected a barrier around her just before she was hit by Wolfram's flames, she was only lightly brushed, I guess you could say, by the surge of the attack and thrust back."

Gwendal? Aaah, I guess he's a pretty decent guy after all.

"Yeah, still. Right, aaah, that's great, I was pretty worried, what would I do if a girl were really burned—would it be my fault? Would it be my responsibility?! That's when the blood went—whoosh!—up to my head...er? So what'd I get hit with?"

"Hit...no, oh no, Your Majesty—Your Majesty was the one to do all the *hitting*..."

"Come on, you don't have to baby me. I never had any chance of winning that duel in the first place. I must've been so scared out of my mind that I totally blocked out my memories of it."

I twist my head—*crackle*—to loosen my muscles and wait for the familiar 'I thought that might be the case' from Conrad. But those words never come. Because he's not even in the vicinity.

"What happened to Conrad—work?"

"Indeed, work. Actually, a dispute arose in a village near the border, and he has set out with Gwendal to suppress it. Though he knew that Your Majesty's condition was not serious, he must have felt that leaving you was like pulling his own teeth."

So this country has idioms like pulling teeth and mongrels too.

Someone force-clears his throat from the open door.

The demonic prince, Wolfram, is standing there, looking sullen. Actually, he's the Mazoku prince, but since he presumably hurt me that badly, I can't think of any adjectives to give him but devilish or satanic. I want to stick him with something like Hades or Hell or Blood and turn his name into a B horror flick title.

With a small, rare chuckle, Günter tells me in an undertone, "After what happened, Wolfram was rebuked by Lady Cäli."

"Huh, so that mom scolds her kids, too?"

"Provoking her anger is not something I would..."

"Stop going on about unnecessary details, Günter!"

The chastised third son approaches the bed with loud footsteps. He looks slightly up and away from me in a rather strained manner.

"I'll leave you young people alone now," the granther says suggestively, and leaves the room. Wait, don't leave me alone with hiiiiim! is what I really want to say, but I look down silently and wait for my opponent's move.

"You've got a ways to go!" Wolfram bites out brusquely.

"Huuuh?"

"I thought you might not be a total dunderhead after all, but if you're going to faint after that paltry demonstration, you've still got a ways to go to become the Maou!" he says with arms crossed and chin in the air. He's pretty self-important, this guy. "The next time you challenge me, you'd better put more power in it! 'Cause one or two of those uncool snakes of yours totally can't win against my Fire Sorcery!"

"Snakes? Say what? Aren't you here to apologize to me after getting scolded by your mother?! So what's with the high-and-mighty attitude? You don't look contrite at all!"

"Why should I apologize to you?"

"'Cause you go and change the rules, and use magic that I don't know...augh... geez..."

I remember that I lost in the end. But I've totally forgotten the climax part. I lost, right? Probably? Even though Günter said I wasn't beat up to comfort me.

"Oh whatever, it was a draw, a draw. And I did pretty good to get a draw, too."

"A draw?! I was the last one standing, so I won! But you have nothing to be embarrassed about. There was never any doubt as to the outcome. If I'd been beaten by you, I wouldn't be able to call myself scion of one of the Ten Aristocratic Houses."

"..."

I only sigh, losing whatever energy I had for a retort. Maybe Wolfram's in a good mood or something—he even gives his enemy praise.

"But flicking away my sword like that was pretty good. That's the first time I've taken a blow

like that. Is it swordsmanship from the world you grew up in?"

"Which? Oh, that bases-loaded homerun? No, that wasn't swordsmanship or martial arts or anything like that. It was just an accident because the grip of that sword I borrowed felt like a bat's, so I sorta took a swing out of habit."

"Bat? Grip? Are they names of the weapons you're accustomed to using?"

"Noooo, they're not. Bats are baseball equipment—something that looks like a stick, and then you have the glove and the ball, and pitcher throws the ball and the batter hits it, and if the batter is successful, he becomes a runner, and the catcher kills the runner—"

"So it is a life-and-death contest after all."

"That's not what killing means! It's way more fun and more exciting."

"I don't get what's so fun about hitting a ball with a stick."

"Aaaargh, you gotta actually see it to get how baseball's interesting! Oh, but I can't really show you by myself...I mean, in this world, the baseball population is me and Conrad and those kids..."

"I don't want to hear about Conrad when you're talking with me."

Mention of the second son seems to darken the mood of the third.

"He went to his favorite human village."

"Eh? Günter said something about a dispute or quarrel...?"

The children in the village near the border. Brandon, Howell, Emma, two more whose names I didn't hear.

"Yeah, it's land we lent to the refugees. Their early crop of barley ripens around this time, and they make an easy target for the neighboring village. They had a bumper crop last year, which probably makes it all the more dangerous for them this year."

The blood suddenly boils in my veins. My blood pressure goes through the roof without warning, and I become light-headed. There's a buzzing in my ears. Though I must still be sitting on the bed, I have the sensation that I've fallen into a bottomless pit.

"What, are you worried? Oh right, you're half-human, too."

"How...what's the scale of the damage? It's not so bad that people have died...is it...?"

"I've never heard of disputes without casualties...what, Yuuri, are you going to the bathroom?"

"No, I'm not!"

I drag my body out of bed on a wing and a prayer and, tottering from starvation and dehydration, look around the vicinity of my feet for shoes.

"If I don't go, if I don't make sure they're okay—"

"Go, huh?? To the border? You want to see Conrart's face that much?!"

"I'm worried about the children!"

His voice flattens in disinterest. "Right, you're worried about the refugees?"

"Shut up, it doesn't have anything to do with you!"

"What do you mean, it doesn't have anything to do with me? Are you planning to go looking like that? Get some proper clothes on and brush your hair—you've got an incredible case of bed hair, it's so messy! And you need to go at the right time—at least wait until dawn, and go drink and eat something. Oh yeah, don't eat too much, or it'll be turning around in your stomach."

After going on and on, Wolfram calls towards the door. A different woman from the first one appears, and he commands her to bring food and clothes.

"All right."

"A-all right what?"

The blond prince says arrogantly, "You want to go, don't you? I'll give you a ride."

What's with him being nice enough to offer me a ride when our relationship is just this side of absolute zero? Could he be scheming to take my life again by making me fall from the horse? If I let him give me a ride, would it be a good thing or a trap? In the several conflicted seconds I take to weigh the possibilities, Wolfram grows even more high-and-mighty.

"Anyhow, you can't even ride a horse on your own—you're a totally incompetent Maou, Yuuri! It's no trouble for me, since my horse has no problems carrying extra luggage, but I guess you're unsure about even that! Never in the history of the Maous has there been one as hopelessly wimpy as you!"

"D-don't call me a wimp!"

Chapter 9

The village is burning.

Accompanied by ten soldiers on horseback, we sallied forth from the castle in the gray of pre-dawn without telling Günter. I'm sitting behind Wolfram, but his horse-riding is so wild that we covered a painful distance in just the first day. I'm getting pretty good at riding in tandem, so I've somehow made it through even the rough trip.

Wolf's followers, ridiculously beautiful to a man, are soldiers from his private army. Right, I guess they must all be pure-blooded Mazoku with proper pedigrees.

I feel a gaze on me, and look up to see one of the Kotsuhizoku following slightly behind us. I wonder why I feel him—it?—looking at me even though there're only holes in the cranium

where eyes should be?

"My elder brother's already arrived, so everything should be resolved—he must be working on counter-measures. I don't think it'll be especially dangerous, but anyhow, since you're a wimp, don't go where I can't keep an eye on you."

"...Don't call me a wimp..."

But when we arrive in the late afternoon, the village, the houses and fields are burning. The flames are so strong that they stain the cloudy sky a bloody scarlet. Soldiers are running around working to prevent the fire from spreading to the forest, and the villagers are gathered in a group a small distance away from the fence.

There are only women, children, and the elderly standing there, all of them frozen and speechless. A single elderly woman is wailing.

"You told me that everything would be resolved by now."

"That's strange, it should be..."

"But we can already see it right in front of us. Aaah, what should we do? Everything's burning, I wonder if they're all okay?"

The village is several dozen meters in front of us; we need to hurry and come out of the forest—just then.

"You're completely ignorant of the ways of the world as usual, little princeling."

An amused, familiar voice comes from behind us where only our soldiers should be.

"...American football macho?!"

Accompanied by only three horsemen is the Denver Broncos I met on the first day. If I remember correctly, his name is...

"Adalbert, right?"

"Huh, you've got a pretty good memory. When we first met I thought that you were just a simpleton."

"Well, sorry for looking like a simpleton."



I seem to be the only one interacting with him; when I turn around to take a look, all the beautiful soldiers are sitting unmoving on their horses as if they've been frozen there. Even Wolfram sitting stiffly in front of me is so still that he doesn't even blink.

Adalbert slowly approaches us and speaks as he scrutinizes Wolfram's profile.

"This is why you're naive. Can you really protect the king with only ten horsemen? And all of them pure-blooded Mazoku who are easily caught by the Houjutsu magic seal. This is when you have to choose that last soldier on whom magic has no effect."

Which means that right now, everyone except for me has been put out of commission by this magic seal thingamajig?! I can't believe it, the goal is right in front of us. It's like a car that runs out of gas and stops dead on the road with the gas station in sight.

"Yo, we meet again, Your New Maou Majesty."

"Yeah, hi."

I'm not sure whether or not he's an enemy, so I give him a vague greeting for now. Though he seems hostile towards the Mazoku, I have to say he's been rather kind to me. When we first met, he interceded for me with the villagers, and he taught me the language, too.

And besides, his full name is Adalbert von Grantz. Which really sounds Mazoku, doesn't it?

"...Is it because of you that they can't move?"

"Well, you might say so. Just a bit of magic-sealing Houjutsu I learned. Why are you riding behind him? How in the world did you tame the third princeling who only wags his tail for his mother and eldest brother?"

I don't think he's been tamed at all. But this man is an acquaintance of Conrad's, and judging from what he just said, he knows Wolfram and Gwendal too. Then why is he hostile towards them? I pose the question.

"You're actually Mazoku, aren't you?"

Adalbert's eyebrows rise, and he scowls as he answers curtly, "A long time ago."

"Then why is your relationship with them and with Conrad so bad? Why do you purposely interfere?"

"Because I hate them."

Hate?

"I hate the Mazoku to death. I am sick of their ways. That's why I'm going to save you from their filthy hands. Now, pitiful sacrifice from another world, let's hurry and leave this place."

"Save...me...?"

"You were brought here without warning from another world and coerced into being the Maou, weren't you? The Maou is the humans' enemy. He is the fiend who corrupts and ruins this world. Someone like you, a young, innocent human, will be made out to be that villain. Atrocious, isn't it? Don't you think it's a bit too much?"

He confirmed that I was a human when I first came to this world. I'm just your average first year senior high school student; I don't carry the Maou's soul like Günter and Conrad and Lady Cäli are hoping. That's what they keep telling me, but no one really believes it.

"They need a scapegoat, you see—a sacrifice to put on the throne. And for that they need a pure young man who doesn't know anything, who cannot offer any resistance or defiance. You'll be set up as the target for the hatred of all the humans who oppose the Mazoku—that's the only reason they need you to be the Maou."

"...I..."

Adalbert comes up beside us. His words echo twice, thrice in my ears.

"You're a good person, a human. That's why the magic seal has no effect on you. Isn't that true?"

"...Yeah, I'm human...not Mazoku...not the Maou..."

"Don't listen to him!" Wolfram forces out a shout, and my shoulders tremble.

"Ah, eh, y-you can talk?!"

"Don't listen to anything he says! That man...!"

It's not just my shoulders that are trembling; with my arms wrapped around his waist, I can feel his whole body quivering. He is still frozen in place, facing forward. Beads of sweat drip from the nape of his neck.

"That man...betrayed us...! He's trying...to win you over...too!"

"Wolfram, if it hurts too much, don't try to talk!"

"That's enough, little princeling!"

The man who was just labeled a traitor draws his longsword in one smooth motion and points its tip at the throat of the Mazoku prince.

"Don't force yourself. I suppose your power is a bit too high for me to control completely. If you relax your consciousness a little, you can have some fun like your subordinates."

I twist my head to see. The unfocused gazes of the Mazoku cavalry that we brought with us are wandering giddily in midair as if they were drunk.

The proud Wolfram looks like he's about to pop a vein.

Adalbert delivers the final blow.

"Look, the humans you hate so much are setting the Mazoku land ablaze. Wolfram, haven't you always said: What can those humans do? It's a mistake for those worms to strike back at the Mazoku. Haven't you?"

"Humans?!"

I lean forward on the horse.

With just more one kick we could've left the forest. Through the gaps in the trees I can see a scene of despair and hatred. From the direction of the fire, an arrow-like shadow draws a trail against the sky as it comes flying. Someone is attacking someone else without engaging in close-quarters sword fighting.

A mother lies flat on the ground with her child in her arms. Soldiers rush over, low to the ground, and draw their bows to the limit in a counterattack.

This is war.

I can't believe that it's happening right before my eyes, and I mutter to myself over and over, "They're at war, they're fighting a real, honest-to-goodness war..."

A battle of this scope would probably be called a dispute rather than a war. But this is the first time in my life I'm seen the 'scene' with my own eyes, and I can't think of it as anything but a war.

"...Where and where are...I mean, who's fighting whom? Mazoku and humans?"

An old man sprinting for the cover of the trees goes flying, his back arched. He collapses in front of us. An arrow is sticking out of his waist. He's not dead. Though he's a distance away, our eyes meet.

"Why is he being shot at? He's not a soldier...he's not a soldier however you look at it. He's one of the villagers, the people living here are refugees, aren't they?"

Humans are transforming the Mazoku soil to fire.

But only human children and women and elders are making their living from this soil.

My voice trembles. With shock or horror or something similar.

"You, are you fighting humans like yourselves? Are human soldiers attacking this village where refugee children are just quietly living their lives?"

Wolfram spits bitterly at Adalbert: "This is your doing, isn't it!"

"I merely gave them some suggestions."

I lose my balance and totter precariously. The chestnut shifts slightly. I grab two fistfuls of its reddish mane.

Looking at the terrible scene, the man branded a traitor tells me, "One could say that this is a commandment to not turn your back on the teachings of God. Did you know? Last year they had a recording-setting bumper crop, and there was a tax increase in their country. This year they are being taxed the same amount, which means they don't even have enough left to eat. They have only two choices: do they starve, or do they provision themselves? They came seeking my advice. So I told them. The village just next to theirs is on the land of the cursed Mazoku. They would not anger God if they take from those who live on the Mazoku's land and till the Mazoku's fields. He would turn a blind eye even to the grave crime of stealing from one's neighbors."

"But they're all human, aren't they?! The villagers are all human, just like the people attacking them!"

"No, not *just like*. The people of this village are *humans who have sided with the Mazoku*. Those who ally themselves with the Mazoku can no longer be thought of as one of us."

I wearily slap my thigh, my hands clutched together so hard that my thumbs hurt.

"I don't understand you!"

"You don't have to understand. In any case, I came to take you away. You're human, not Mazoku, right? You're only a victim who was brought here from another world because your hair and eyes are both black. They'll put you on the throne and make you their scapegoat. If you take the side of the Mazoku, you will no longer be one of us."

Adalbert jumps off and lands on his horse's left, maybe intending to give me a hand. Now that he's off his horse, we may be able to put some distance between us. Wolfram murmurs in a low voice without turning, "Go."

"Huh?"

"They apparently don't intend to kill you. You'll just cause more problems if you get hurt trying to resist uselessly. Do what he says for now."

"But what about you and everybody..."

"Don't worry about us."

I swallow further protest. What would happen to them if I left them here?

Wolfram repeats in a low voice, "Hurry up and go, Yuuri!"

Adalbert slowly comes around from the opposite side and holds his hand out to me.

"That's true, isn't it, Wolfram. Even if you lose him here, all you'll have to do is summon another kid to replace him. You'll get a slap on the wrist from your brothers for letting the Maou-presumptive escape from under your very nose, but that won't matter as long as nothing happens to you. It's a much smarter choice than risking your life to protect him."

Wolfram only bites his lip and says something softly as I unclasp my arms. I'm not even sure if it's with my ears that I hear the words.

"...I'll come get you back, no matter what happens."

In the space of my next heartbeat, I speedily take in all that I know and all that I feel, looking for guidance on what I should do. Looking for the best course of action for this moment right now, regardless of the consequences later.

Which of these choices can I take that I will not regret later?

"Don't think I'm going to ride with you just because you're giving me a hand."

I jump down and land athletically on my feet, as if the pain of long hours on horseback has given me elasticity. I step up to a horse in the back, pretending to look for a good rider among Adalbert's followers.

"I hate well-built machos like you. It arouses my inferiority complex. And I lose when it comes to looks, too."

"Then who will you ride with? Or will you ride alone?"

"Alone? No way!"

At the last "way", I slap the foot of a drunken subordinate as hard as I can. He doesn't seem to wake up, but his spur hits the belly of his horse, and the dappled gray neighs and springs forward. It leads the other horses into a gallop. Those who stop, faltering, I kick into a dash.

Suddenly there's the sound of hoof beats all around us, and the herd of ten-odd horses gallops swiftly in a chaos of enemies and allies towards the forest exit. Wolfram's chestnut is caught up in the stampede, and only Adalbert and I are left behind.

"...Why did you do that?"

"Wolfram *did* choose the last person. You just didn't notice that that person is me."

Aah, unfortunately, now that I've turned into the last person, I notice that they never gave me any weapons I might use to protect myself.

"Yuuri, I told you that I want to rescue you from the Mazoku for your own sake. Why would you want to deliberately waste my good intentions, eh?"

"I've already decided to stay until the end. In this nightmarish attraction. But you're not the one I want to stay with. I don't need you on my team."

Since he's not part of my game plan, I'm giving him due notice that he's dismissed from the team.

"Hey hey, that's not true."

Adalbert advances on me, swinging his gigantic two-handed sword.

"And here I was trying so hard not to frighten you. I should've just threatened you and broken one of your arms at the start and taken you captive."

"M-my right arm is my throwing arm, so I hope you'll spare that one."

"The left one is fine, too. But the best way to finish this up quick and easy is..."

I guess my personnel selection was on the money where he's concerned.

"...to just get rid of the Maou."

"Eek!"

Even I think it's a pitiful scream. But I've got no chance against that humongous longsword he's brandishing when I'm totally lacking in swordsmanship experience. And *his* weapon is probably not a practice sword. Probably? It's absolutely seen real fighting.

"W-weren't you going to rescue me from the Mazoku?! It's still not too late to do that, right? You don't have to change your mind so suddenly! You don't have to kill me, 'cause I can leave this world by walking out on my own feet!"

"You've decided to throw your lot in with the Mazoku, haven't you? Which means you're my enemy. If I allow the Mazoku to keep a Maou with real power, it'll make my life that much harder!"

"But didn't you tell me earlier that I'm just an average person, that they're only giving me the position of the Maou because I happen to have black hair and eyes? You said that I'm just an ordinary human being summoned here from another world, a victim!"

The blade whistles with terrible weight as it changes direction.

"Did you really think the Shinou is one who would play around with something like this?"

"Then then then then it was a lie?! You were just making some random speech about me being an ordinary human being?!"

"I said it to see if I could win you over to my side, but..." Adalbert adjusts his alignment with perfect efficiency. "You're the real thing, I'm sorry to say."

I back into a dry tree trunk. There's no escape behind me now. I can maybe dodge him once or twice, but I'll still be in a futile situation. This is not the same as my duel with Wolfram; there's a good chance of me getting wounded or killed, and the difference

between our skill levels is exceptionally high.

The shadow of his upraised sword falls on my forehead. I close my eyes in resignation.

The air vibrates as if with the passage of a fastball, and I hear a dry sound like a dead tree branch being severed. Splintered fragments fall with dry rattles on my feet and arms where I'm crouched. A ball-shaped object rolls into my lap with a rustle, and I slowly open one eye.

"Ko...!"

The Kotsuhizoku who followed us all the way here was "broken" by Adalbert's huge sword. He's almost completely smashed into pieces like maybe he took a critical hit and had his spinal cord severed. His skull is lying in my lap, and his light-brown wings are convulsing.

He...protected me?

"Kohy, why did you...?"

"This is the first time I've seen such behavior from the Kotsuhizoku. It gave its own life to save its master? Feh, so I cut down some weird thing."

"What do you mean, some weird thing?!"

Apologizing silently to Kohy, I stand with a part of him (probably a femur) clutched tightly in my hand. Of course I don't think bone can stand against a sword. But if I wait for the next life with eyes closed, it'd make his death meaningless.

"What the hell do you know about Kohy?!"

Well, not that I know much, either.

No longer concealing his true nature, Adalbert gives a true villain's laugh.

"You're pitying something that doesn't even have a will of its own? The Maou this time is truly a king of the masses, huh?"

"Shut up! I'm selling the king of the masses idea—I'm gonna promise to lower the consumption tax!"

As I position the bone...the weapon, a group of riders who probably wouldn't be happy even with 3% approaches. They're not princes on white steeds, but Lord Weller and Lord von Bielefeld's troops.

"Unfortunately, since I'm vastly outnumbered and have only one horse, I can't escape with you as hostage," Adalbert concedes, and disappears before the reinforcements arrive. Conrad sends several of the troops under his command in pursuit and instructs them to ascertain Adalbert's destination: Be sure not to approach him more than necessary, and don't move against him even if you think you have a chance. It would put your lives in peril.

"Though he'll probably throw them off."

Then we exchange embraces that would put foreigner actors to shame. For some reason, Wolfram throws sand at us.

"Yuuri, thank goodness we arrived in time. I thought we might be too late this time."

"I'm happy you got here, too! I finally get why guys hug each other like you see in movies."

Because that's how I feel. Conrad says gingerly as we—*pak pak*—slap each other's backs, "By the way, what is that hard object hitting my back?"

"Aaah, this? It's a bone."

"A bone. Ah yes, I see, a bone. Um, Your Majesty, what were you planning to use that for?"

"Weeell, I thought I might use it as a club."

He quickly draws back from me, forehead creasing.

"You weren't planning to fight Adalbert with that, were you...?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't just going to stand around and let him kill me."

"Augh, Your Majesty, you do realize that this is totally different from your duel with Wolfram?! He and Wolf are on completely different levels!"

"Well, sorry for being on a different level!"

The third son dismounts from his chestnut and kicks the undergrowth unhappily. The effects of the magic seal seem to have been removed, but his face can't be said to have a healthy color even generously.

"Are you all right, Wolfram?"

"Humph, I don't need you to worry about me."

"Then I won't worry about you—"

"He's suffering the consequences of his own actions, deciding on his own to bring the Maou to a place like this."

The rebuke by his youthful older brother doesn't evoke a particle of bashfulness from Wolfram. Since I was the one who asked him, I quickly change the subject.

"Anyway, how did you get here so fast?"

"I think we were much too slow. We were in the middle of battle near the border on the other side of the village when our party's Kotsuhizoku heard the predicament of its fellow. I've mentioned that they have the unique ability to transmit intentions, so that they can communicate with each other across distances with the mind alone, right? So I left matters over there in Gwen's hands and galloped back. We met Wolfram along the way..."

"That's right! What do we do about Kohy?!"

I scrape together the fragments scattered around the tree's roots and softly place the skull in the middle.

"Poor Kohy...you gave up your own life for mine...I'm so sorry, you probably have a wife and child too..."

Speaking of which, I'm not even sure if Kohy is male or female. But at least I can make a simple grave and bring him flowers on the anniversary of his death and during equinoctial week; sorry, but—I start digging in the grass with his own femur.

"Aaah, wait, Your Majesty, don't bury it."

"What are you talking about? I'm not going to just let Kohy lie out here to get bleached and weather-beaten!"

"We have a responsibility to put it back together. If you bury it, it won't be able to fly anymore."

"Huh?"

"Because if you reassemble the Kotsuhizoku properly, they'll be able to fly like before."

"H-he's not dead?"

"There are really a great many things we do not understand about their existence."

"Really? They're really that much like plastic models? Then if you put a weird bone in a weird place, won't you be creating a new life-form?"

"It's all right, we have specialized experts."

Pro modelers? But I'm glad. I'm just happy that he's still alive.

When we finally leave the forest and return to the village, Conrad admonishes me to be careful repeatedly and in great detail before going off to deal with the enemy soldiers who were too slow in escaping: "We're close to a resolution, but there are still pockets of resistance. So please do not go where I cannot see you. Because there have been those who've lost their lives to stray arrows."

"S-stray arrows, huh?"

Speaking of which, I wonder what happened to that old man who got hit by the stray arrow-like object. Taking care not to leave Conrad's field of vision, I head for the corner where the injured have been gathered.

The first-aid tent made from fire-repellant cloth looks like something out of an athletic meet. But the atmosphere beneath its roof is not so festive; there are more than twenty injured people stretched out directly on the grass. More and more people are carried inside as I stand there in dumbfounded surprise.

It doesn't matter if they're Mazoku or human or villagers. They're screaming and moaning and crying.

A girl with pale skin hurries busily to and fro by herself—one of the Healers, as Günter called them. I guess that means she's an orderly? It looks like both men and women alike go to the battlefield in this country. They're strangely progressive on that point.

"If there's anything I can do to help..."

The girl looks up and is taken aback at the sight of me. She appears to be around Wolfram's age, but she's almost certainly older than me.

"Oh no, Your Majesty! That would be unthinkable, I can manage here by myself."

"But there're more and more people being carried in."

"Um, um, I'm so sorry that Your Majesty must see such an unsightly place. Please, Your Majesty, return to the army and command our troops."

Shaking my head, I step into her territory.

"It's not unsightly at all...everyone here is injured and in pain—and besides, I'm not really the type that can command an army."

As yet another person is brought inside, the orderly seems to change her mind. She hands me a box that looks like a first-aid kit and points at a man near the entrance.

"I'm really sorry about this, but in that case, can I ask you to use this liquid to disinfect that patient's wounds? They're relatively minor. Please be sure to wear gloves. Cloth and pincers are over there. Um, Your Majesty, do you have any experience treating wounded soldiers...?"

"No, but I don't think I'll faint, at least."

Since I have seen injuries caused by pitches and slides and spikes. Reassured, the female soldier heads over to examine a seriously-wounded patient. I sprinkle disinfectant boldly on the man with a gash in his thigh. This is nothing like a cut from a spike; you can see the pink color where the flesh is open.

"I was pretty unlucky, I guess, to be hit where I had no armor. But don't worry, it's a shallow cut. Look, you can't see the bone or the muscle."

My hands are shaking.

"Oh no, Your Majesty, that's be a waste..."

"A waste? The medicine prevents it from rotting. Hey, wait, is this a salve?"

The girl nods at me. I coat a largish piece of gauze with yellow gel from the kit and wrap the wide bandage around the man's thigh the way they taught everyone in Health and Physical Education or Boy Scouts as he continues to repeat that it's a waste. Next! I psych myself up, and look for the ones with laceration and burn injuries.

They're all relatively cheerful, but to somebody like me who's never encountered more than scratches and bruises from club activities, this counts as a "field hospital." After

treating several patients with minor injuries, I turn to a man lying face-down on the ground.

There's a slanting cut across his back, but thanks to the chain mail he's wearing, the bleeding is comparatively light. He looks like a merchant attacked by a samurai to test out a new sword. Bright tawny hair falls to his dirty collar. He's wearing a leather cord around his neck. The coin attached to it is lying at the back of his head. Maybe it's a good-luck necklace or some country's currency; I pick up the glittering 1 yen coin without thinking.

"Don't touch it!"

"Eh, ah, I'm sorry! I wasn't going to steal it or anything, I just thought it was pretty..."

"Don't touch me! You're going to kill me either way, aren't you?! There's no way a Mazoku would let a human live."

"I...I'm not going to kill you or anything..."

He tries to get up and grimaces and moans with pain. I can't understand any of the curses he hurls at me. He doesn't look at me.

"Are you human?"

"Of course I am, dammit, don't put me together with you Mazoku! Damn you, kill me now if you're going to kill me."

"I'm not going to kill you! What, you're an adult already, are you so afraid of having your wounds disinfected?"

"Disinfected? Don't pretend to be good guys *now*, the Mazoku would never help humans! You cursed Mazoku kill humans, that's why we're returning the favor."

I ignore him and pour the liquid onto his wound.

"I'm not gonna kill you, so shut up already, geez! And besides, the people living in this village are humans, aren't they? If the Mazoku kill humans, then how come those people are alive! You're the ones who came to destroy the peaceful lives they worked so hard to build!"

That's right, they attacked a human village, turned their swords on humans. Shot arrows at them.

Though they're all human.

The man twists his head, trying to look at me. I stand and look down at him.

"That village *should* be destroyed! The people there sold their souls to the Mazoku—it doesn't matter if we steal from them; putting it to the torch is a matter of course! God forgives us, he lends us the power to punish the Mazoku!"

There's a touch of hysteria in his voice, perhaps from the pain and loss of blood.

"God has chosen humans!"

"...And what kind of a god is that?"

A soldier next to him with a bandage around his forehead rises, swaying.

"...How dare you...say such things to His Majesty..."

Without even giving me the time to say "wait", he seizes his sword and swings down at the shouting human's neck.

"Don...!"

"Stop it!"

The blade whistles sharply through the air and thrusts into the soft earth. The man's head is still attached to his body; luckily the sword was broken. The female orderly lifts the man's chin and nimbly holds a wet cloth to his nose. The injured human goes limp, and his head drops with a soft thud to the grass.

"I'm sorry, but we have to put injured people to sleep if they get too excited."

She smiles, not at all upset, as if she's seen a lot of these kinds of quarrels.

"I'm very sorry if he offended you, but they are always skeptical. And you, please moderate your behavior as well. You are a patient in my ward. All of you are equal here, and I will not allow you to harm anyone! Oh, Your Majesty."

She peers at me as I stand there overwhelmed, looking at the stone swaying at my throat.

"Did His Excellency Conrart give that to you?"

"Eh, ah, yeah."

"Ah, I see."

She nods slightly as if at a memory, and begins examining the next patient.

"It suits you, very much so."

I totter over to where Conrad stands directing his troops. A soldier wearing a uniform burned in several spots comes to give a progress report on well-digging.

"All right, don't try to go too near. Dig as extensively as possible, and put up a fence around the entire area."

His subordinate runs off after sketching a brief salute. Wolfram, arms crossed, doesn't look very serious at all.

"When Elder Brother returns, we should just have him swallow the village into the earth. That'll put out the fire and leave the forest unharmed."

"And what about the villagers' homes and land? The fields they worked so hard to clear?"

"Humph, humans like them put it to the torch, so there's nothing for it now but to abandon them."

Humans like them.

Suddenly exhausted without reason, I sink wearily to the ground where I stand, my head between my knees.

"Your Majesty."

Conrad drops to one knee and places a hand softly on my back.

"Why did they do something like this?...Because they needed food? I thought that some Mazoku like Wolfram and Gwendal who looked down on humans attacked the village out of hatred."

Wolfram snorts as if to say that that's a ridiculous idea.

"Why would we do something that pointless? This land has belonged to the Mazoku for a long time—setting fire to it would destroy the environment. And if the fire reaches the forest, the damage wouldn't be reversible in just a year or two."

Flames and black smoke rise from the houses. One by one, they eventually collapse into smoldering, heartbreaking ruins. The fields that glittered green and gold when I visited here just days before are now scorched black. The livestock have taken refuge within the forest.

"Why would humans do this to each other...?"

Conrad grasps my shoulders and pulls me forward to shield me from falling sparks.

"The hostility between you Mazoku and the humans is not a good thing, but it's not like I can't understand it. I mean, um, I can't say this very well, but it's like killer whales and dolphins not getting along...but the animosity is there because of the differences between you, right? At least I can understand that. But why would humans fight each other?"

The hysterical laughter of the man from earlier echoes in my head.

"It'd be like dolphins hurting each other, right?! Why doesn't it anger God when people do something that pointless and cruel?"

He who stands between the Mazoku and humans says in a voice so low that I cannot read its tone: "Then—"

A voice weary from dispatching his soldiers, despairing. Wheat burnt to ash whirls into the air.

It falls in heaps on the grass, only to be scattered and sent dancing again by hoofs.

It happens again and again. Until it returns to earth for the last time.

"Then do humans never fight each other on the Earth Your Majesty comes from?"

"...Well..."

A rider approaches, illuminated by flames. He's accompanied by only three of his followers, and he's dragging a large cloth-lump behind him. He throws it down in front of us and turns his gaze towards the group of villagers.

"What...!"

The lumps of cloth are people, not rags. One is dressed in a soldier's uniform. There are arrows sticking out of his shoulder and right foot, and blood flows from his forehead until even his eyes are scarlet. The other piece of luggage is a man who looks like a farmer. He's mumbling in a low voice, face pale. He doesn't have any obvious external injuries, but his arms and feet are bent at odd angles.

The bones are—

I narrowly swallow down bile at the thought of the pain he must be in.

"Everything is pretty much resolved. Though the majority escaped over the border."

Gwendal's expression barely changes even under such terrible circumstances. He's as dour and graceful as ever, and bears no evidence of the battle other than the blood of others on his clothes. His eyebrows rise a little at the sight of his youngest brother and company; then he begins to speak of the state of the battle to his other brother, the acknowledged military man.

"This man admitted that Adalbert was the instigator. It's no wonder they were so well-trained. A considerable number of former soldiers participated. One among them was apparently a fire-wizard. That's why the force of the flames."

"There's no indication of it weakening at all. We received word from the Kotsuhizoku around noon that it will take a considerable amount of time yet before our own magic-users arrive. I'm not sure if we can hold out until then. No matter what, we must protect the forest."

"Then they came not to assist us, but simply to gawk? Or..."

Realizing that I'm the one he called a gawker, I hang my head and bite my lip. Gwendal alights gracefully and commands a subordinate to lead his agitated horse away from the fire. He straightens and looks at me.

"How about you summon that magnificent water-Majutsu you used last time to suppress the fires raging in the village?"

"What are you..."

Water Majutsu I used last time? What does that mean? Uneasiness smolders inside my chest. Günter said something about water, too. And stuff about elements and covenants and avatar-forms.

Did I do something during that gap in my memory I haven't taken responsibility for?

"Elder Brother, he apparently doesn't remember," Wolfram says briefly as if it were nothing important. "He was unconscious at the time, so it can only be called a lucky miracle. In

other words, right now Yuuri is a greenie who can't use either sword or Majutsu, or even ride a horse."

"Miracle, me? What kind of amazing miracle did I perform?"

Conrad looks at me apologetically. I know something about that look—it's the look my homeroom teacher gave me when she came to the student counseling office with me. You don't have to look like that, since I'm the one who hit the baseball coach and was kicked out of the team. I don't regret what I did at all. My mom, when she was called to the school, apologized to the coach and the dean of my year for the punch, then smiled and asked: So what did the coach do? Something unpleasant happened to make this boy angry enough to hit the coach, right? Ah, Yuu-chan's always been like this. He may be a child, but it's like he has a policy or some such odd thing, and when something breaches it, the blood goes to his head. And then, well, I guess he forgets himself and thinks only about protecting the word "justice".

I think the teachers concluded that she brought me up that way.

If you're to believe my mother, I'm acting according to my middle-class sense of justice.

Though right now I can't seem to call up even a shred of it...

"If you're not going to help, then at least don't get in our way."

The eldest son seems to never have seriously expected anything at all.

One woman well-advanced in years is pulled stiffly out of the group of villagers huddled together. Her cheeks are lined with loose strands of blonde hair and tears, and she cowers in front of the man whose beauty and position are lofty even among the Mazoku. A soldier hands her a sword and leads her towards the cringing enemy.

Gwendal tells her, "They burned your village. You can kill them, hang them, do as you like to them."

"What?!"

He glares at me as if to say "You again?" But I can't just leave this alone, me being me.

Until I got transferred to another world, this is what society taught me to do.

But this is who I am.

I clench my fists and stand between the woman and the wounded soldier to challenge the power at the head of the Mazoku alone.

"No, you can't! I mean, he's a prisoner of war, isn't he?! There are rules about the treatment of prisoners. The Healer girl said earlier that all injured people are equal, too."

"Conrart, do something about this loudmouth."

"I'm not going away!"

I guess he's a bit irritated; he says with a hand against his forehead, "That applies to the regular soldiers, but these are the ringleaders."

"They should be treated in the same way even if they are the ringleaders, you can't just sentence them to death! They should have proper lawyers and be given a trial to decide whether or not they're guilty..."

I turn to the woman who can't even lift her weapon and plead desperately, "Madam, you can't listen to these insane people. No matter how important or great the other person is, there will be times when obeying him will be wrong and times when it'll be wrong. Like not killing a prisoner out of hand—you learned as a part of your compulsory education, right? In junior-high History and Social Studies and stuff, they told you that it's prohibited because it becomes lynching, right?"

"But I...don't..."

"She never received any education. Because it would cause defiance and trouble for the nobility, the humans dislike giving their common people too much knowledge. The idea that they're obligated to provide education is absurd."

"There's no compulsory education?!"

What happens to human rights in a sword-and-sorcery world?

I can't say that it's because of my pleading, but the woman only stands frozen, hesitating, so the lynching seems to have been prevented for now. I brush down my jacket and look around, trying to figure out what I can do. Like forming a fire-extinguishing squad around the village or organizing a bucket relay like I originally planned. But I don't see water anywhere. Everyone is digging.

"Why not use water to put out the fire?" I ask Conrad casually.

"There is no well nearby. And magical fire cannot be extinguished by a small amount of water. It will burn the target set by the wizard who started it to nothing, so the conflagration will spread more slowly than ordinary fires, but it cannot be put out without a great deal of water. Gwendal's expertise is earth-magic, so we thought of forming a barricade out of soil, but the effect underground would be too great, and the forest might be compromised...that's why there's nothing we can do right now but wait for someone who can manipulate water."

Manipulate water. Is that something I did? In that totally blank gap in my memories?

Standing with his hands on his hips, Wolfram asks his brother excitedly, "Can we use this invasion of our land as the pretext for a declaration of war?"

"...Well, it can be one of the pretexts."

Declarationofwar?

Declarationofwar, de-cla-ra-tion-of-war, declaration of war. These are words I've rarely heard in my day-to-day life of fifteen years, and I have to ruminate over them for a moment before I understand their meaning.

Declaration of war?

"Declaration of war?! As in, us commencing battle?! Tell me you're joking!"

They ignore me.

"...Think a bit more about the big picture, Wolfram. None of the soldiers from the regular army were involved. If we use this raid as the main reason, they can get away with sacrificing a single village. What we need is certainty."

"Then we just stand around biting our thumbs and watch them they do what they want to our borderlands?"

"You guys, listen to me!!"

They glance at me, but don't look like they intend to take me seriously at all.

The blood is rushing to my brain at reckless speeds. If someone cut my veins now I'd lose it all. Even while I'm trying to stay calm and search for the right words, my throat is convulsing, and my voice ends up shaking.

"Don't you guys know anything about a non-aggressive defensive policy?! It means that you only protect! It means that you never ever provoke battle! Modern-day Japan is built on pacifism, we've renounced war, and that's written in the constitution, out-and-out! I was born Japanese and I grew up in Japan, so of course I'm against war! And not only am I against it, I'm strongly opposed!"

I point at Conrad, my voice rising, "You told me that people fight each other on Earth, too, right?! Yes, they do, of course Earth isn't completely free of war. But when it happens, there're always people trying their best to stop it! The majority of people in the world wish for peace!"



I begin to shout, half out of frustration. I'm not sure who's more hot-tempered: Wolfram or me.

"What are you trying to say?! That you'll just stand around watching until you're certain we're going to war?!"

"...Stop shouting."

Gwendal scowls as if he's trying to hold back a headache. But my nickname is the *Turkischer Marsch*.

"Why don't you sit down and discuss it, talk to each other! The citizens of your country burned our fields. What will you do, how will you guarantee that it won't happen again? We want to avoid war, so how will you deal with this problem within your own borders such that it'll never happen again? So I'm saying that you need to discuss it to reach a resolution!"

"Stop shouting, Other-Worlder!"

"No, I'm not shouting, you're the one shouting! I'm Japanese until I'm twenty, so even if I'm carrying the Maou's soul, I'm a Japanese citizen until I'm an adult. I think Japan is superior to this country when it comes to peace, so I'm gonna talk even if you tell me to shut up! I'm against war, I'm against war, I'll be against war my whole life, I'm against war even if you kill me!"

"Then why don't we kill you for a bit and find out?!"

"No thanks!"

All right! I think to myself. Cool, even though Gwendal treats me like a little punk who pisses in the courtyard, I've gotten him wrapped up in my argument. Now that we've gotten to this point, I'm not backing off. Even if I have to put on the Maou act and threaten him a bit.

"You have no business barging into a conversation about this country when you have no intention of becoming king! My responsibility is to protect Shinma Kingdom, thinking of the national interest is my duty! Why don't you go protect your own homeland with these exaggerated morals and half-hearted measures from this place you call Japan? We Mazoku have our own ways of doing things!"

"Then I'll change them! I'll change the Mazoku way of doing things, starting from square one!"

The air here is unpolluted, the earth here is unpoisoned, the forest here is untouched, this world is beautiful. But there's something weird about it.

"You guys are beautiful and amazing, but your uber-bad personalities are a total problem! Like this discrimination of humans and your dangerous customs and this privileged class consciousness and liking war. That's why being at peace with humans is so unthinkable to you! And humans even think that attacking other humans is fine if they're living on Mazoku land! What kinda stupid reasoning is that?! Is there any religion so disturbing that it says God will lend you power even if you're going to war?!"

"Your Majesty."

Among the three brothers, only Conrad calls me Your Majesty. His eyes: yellow topaz with holes poked through them.

"They're also absolutely wrong, but that's why we can't just let ourselves get carried along. We should at least do the right thing, going to war would be a mistake."

Sorry Conrad, the Marsch can't be stopped at its climax. I'm giddy from lack of oxygen. Who are we? Which group have I put myself in? Aren't I supposed to be human?

"If the king says that we must not go to war, the people of the kingdom will obey, won't they?" I ask, my voice going lower and lower.

"Your Majesty!"

Then I shout: "...I'll become the Maou...!"

"Yuuri?!"

"I'll become the king of Shinma Kingdom!"

If I don't give the signal, the game will never start.

Behind us, the fire has spread to the fence. A woman's scream covers a small explosion-like sound.

"What..."

I bend over, coughing violently just as I'm about to turn. The punch to my right ribcage blocks the oxygen from entering my lungs.

"Don't move!"

My chin is forcefully held in a double headlock. Heavy metal presses against my throat and chest, and someone breathes right next to my ear.

The ringleader cowering on the ground a moment ago has stolen the weapon out of the woman's hand. His blood-reddened eyes are glinting, and he pants wildly in excitement and pain. There are still arrows sticking out of his shoulder and foot.

"Nobody move, or I'll slit his throat."

I move my eyeballs as far as they can go, trying to see the man's face.

"You, don't try to resist!"

"All right..."

Heart of a mouse, that's me.

"Or does the great Maou, His Majesty the lord of demon lords, hear anything underlings like us have to say?"

Someone clicks his tongue. Who was that?

The man says with a half-laugh as he pulls me along, "If you're really the Maou, should this

be so easy? And me a mere private?"

"...!..."

"Taken hostage and kidnapped somewhere? Why don't you guys try a curse? It'll probably kill me, but I'll take him down with me! Don't even think about betting on who'll get it first, I've been a soldier for twenty years!"

A pain like fever runs across my neck, probably a shallow cut against my skin.

At a prudent distance from the Mazoku, the man demands a horse, water, and provisions.

"Since it looks like I'm gonna die anyway, what I wanna ask is, didn't you say this kid here's the Maou? Even though it looks like he can't use a sword or magic—do Maous like this really exist?"

"Not...like...I can...help it...."

My throat hurts where the tip of the sword touches it, but my ribs hurt more. Tears leak out of my eyes every time I breathe.

"Well, whatever the case, he's the only bearer of the Twin Black in this world. Even if he's not the king, he'll easily make my fortune. Did you know? There are people who'll give you however much money you want for the Twin Black, because he who obtains the one with black hair and eyes holds the power of everlasting youth and everlasting life."

I heard. Three, six days ago. I'll spend the rest of my life as somebody's miracle drug, with no control over even my own life or death—what kind of an absurd life would that be? I squeeze my eyes shut tight.

I'm sorry for yelling earlier—I'll apologize, so please save me now. I plead as hard as I can with my eyes, but none of my allies raise a hand from where they stand surrounding us at a distance. They're not doing anything but respiring.

A horse is tugged over and a small amount of water poured into its saddlebags.

Could this moment be my first and last chance? We can't both mount at the same time, to say nothing of doing it with a sword in front of me. So maybe now is my only chance?

"Get on."

The man circles the sword to my back. I guess he's now positioned to run me through from behind. I can't even tell him that I can't get on the horse without help, and timidly lift my foot up to the stirrup.

In the moment my right foot is about to go over the saddle.

A small black shadow nimbly dashes towards us and pulls out the arrow extruding from the man's foot.

The man croaks like a frog. His blade nicks tawny hide, and the cowardly dappled gray neighs loudly. It rears and throws off its 'luggage' before running off in terror.

"Ack...!"

I thought my body was floating in midair, but it's actually already landed on hardness that's not the ground. My bruised ribs ache, and I gasp painfully for oxygen.

"...Wh...!"

Something warm falls on my fingers as I clutch my chest.

It's blood.

With the sun behind him, I can't see anything of Conrad but his shadowed back. There's another shadowy lump at his feet.

The man lies crumbled on the ground with fresh red blood flowing out of him, cut into two.

"...Is he dead?"

"Who knows."

The voice comes from beneath me, and I hurriedly shift my rump to the grass. Gwendal brushes the mud and ashes off his clothes. Why was he lying under me? I don't have the time to ask.

Because I spot the small forlorn form of my savior, who was probably knocked away by the dappled gray.

The flames are already bearing down on him, but the boy lying on his face doesn't move a muscle despite the heat.

"...Hey..."

Blond hair sticking up out of his head, a well-built kid.

"Brandon."

"Yuuri, it's dangerous, I'll—"

I shake off Conrad's arm and stagger towards the flames. A child, people are going to be burned by this spiteful fire set by some unknown person, by this cowardly inextinguishable fire.

"Brandon!"

Gigantic flames leap at us from one side, but Conrad somehow mows them down.

"Brandon?!"

I turn the boy over and lift him to my lap. His eyes flicker open slightly, and his lips move. He's alive!

"...Your Majesty..."

"You don't have to call me your majesty."

"...But you're...going to be...the king...aren't you...?"

"Brandon."

I'll protect this village, I'll protect all of you—that's what I promised. I promise.

Something falls drop by drop onto the child's cheeks.

"I promise."

"You'll...teach me...how to throw...too...right?"

"I promise!"

As if timed to synchronize with my shout, thunder suddenly splits my ears.

A sweet, gentle, joyful murmur in the inner parts of my semicircular canals.

We would give you our last drop...

Rain strikes the ground.

A rare downpour.

Chapter 10

"Uuuurgh, I can't believe it, how did this happen?"

I swallow nausea as I glare at the marble corridor leading to the door of the great hall.

"Nothing for it now, since you were the one who proclaimed that you've made up your mind to become the Maou."

Leaning against a pillar that might very well touch the sky, Conrad gives me a broad grin, looking totally un-aristocrat-like.

"But the coronation...I've never even seen it outside of my history textbook, figure 8..."

"You're the only nominate, Mother is the presenter."

"Stop talking Academy Award-eese."

Günter was with me for a while too, but as usual, ran off to check on the progress of the ceremony after singing my praises. The praising was of my school uniform and that incident at the village.

"But to use such strong water magic, then remember almost nothing of it..."

The heavy downpour that could only be said to have pinpointed the village let up, unbelievably, at the exact same time it finished extinguishing the fire. When the group of

magic-users arrived from the capital, only sputtering smoke rose from the trees and wheat.

I don't remember anything but finding Brandon. Everything after that is a total blank. It's difficult to give any credence to the extravagant praise that I, a common first year senior high student, am being given for the feat of saving the realm single-handed.

"As I have said, magic is intrinsic to the soul. Your Majesty is the bearer of the Maou's exalted soul, and the four great elements would probably happily obey your will even without bothering with a covenant."

Günter interprets the events as he wishes, and wanders around spreading these rumors as if it were his personal affairs. Conrad is somewhat more objective.

"I had my suspicions about one place we stopped at on our way to the capital. Both of us drank water there. I don't have any magic, so I'm not sure about this, but I have to think that it was some kind of catalyst."

"It doesn't really matter."

I mean, since I performed miracles I can't even remember.

Fluttering gold hair walks towards us from the other end of the corridor. It's the prince of the Mazoku, Wolfram. His deep sapphire uniform suits him wonderfully. If you're going to call a man beautiful, *he's* the one you should be talking about, Günter, I mutter with a sigh.

"What's with the simple get-up?"

"...Huh?"

This just after I was told stuff to the effect of 'this design was created especially for Your Majesty, since the black suit you arrived in suits you best.'

"It has no epaulets and no ornaments at all. Did you think it's no big deal for the one who's going to become the Maou to go around looking like a miserable beggar?"

His gaze darts here and there, looking at anything but my face. Maybe it's my imagination, but his smooth white porcelain cheeks seem to redden just a little.

"I'm not going to let you embarrass me and my brother with that pauper's dress!"

Before I can open my mouth for a retort, Wolfram grabs my chest and affixes a sparkling gold ornament on the left side.

"Hey..."

"Uncle Bielefelt gave that to me when I was little. It doesn't have a long history, so it's perfect for a guy who hasn't even been on the battlefield, let alone decorated in battle. And besides, you can't even ride a horse—you must be the wimpiest king in history."

"Don't call me a wimp!"

"All right, now now."

After that unnaturally rapid-fire speech, Wolfram departs at a trot. His present is a gold bird with outstretched wings. Conrad looks at the retreating figure of his little brother proudly.

"In any case, Wolf appears quite attached to Your Majesty."

"Huuuuuuuh?! That arrogant His Highness Nose-in-the-Air?!"

We're saved from pursuing that topic when the door of the great hall opens a crack. I feel sick again as soon as I see the inside. Lords and nobles from various parts of the kingdom have gathered here for this occasion, as well as representatives from various tribes, some not even remotely human-shaped. My friends the Kotsuhizoku as well as their relatives the Kotsuchizoku, beings that look like the gargoyles you see on top of American buildings, people who walk on all fours and look like gray leopards, hand-sized sprites (or maybe fairies) with wings that look and sound like what you'd see on the large brown cicada, ginormous tuna stretched full-length in huge puddles on the floor...

"Tu-tuna?"

He's telling me that these are all people of this country, so you must accustom yourself to them. Looks do not make the person—I mean, looks do not make the Mazoku. I'm so tense that I've forgotten my policy speech.

The aspirations of the Maou: the Japanization of Shinma Kingdom Plan.

"Let's see, on this occasion on which I am inaugurated the twenty-seventh Maou, we begin our march towards the ultimate goal of pacifism and sovereignty of the pe...pleeeee...Conrad, I think I'm gonna throw up...and the tension is...killing my stomach...I gotta go, where's the toilet?"

"Again?"

"What again, it's my stomach, my stomach's killing me."

"We don't have time for that, Your Majesty!"

My tutor comes running over in a tight white Chinese-style tunic, looking as worried as if he were the one giving the speech.

"We're starting immediately. All right, Your Majesty, please proceed down the center and step onto the platform, then accept the crown from her Prior Majesty Lady Cäcilie as I explained...of course even without this ceremony the people of this country would be unwavering in their loyalty to Your Majesty, but the formalities are important in themselves...."

"Augh, okay already, I said that I'd do it right, didn't I?"

"It eases my mind greatly to hear such an assurance from you. Your resolve gladdens my heart. Just seeing Your Majesty's hope-inspiring form..."

An expressionless man passes next to Günter, who, overcome with emotion, has entered 'granther' mode. I hurriedly stop Gwendal as he reaches for the door.

"Wait a minute, is it okay for you to go in in front of me?"

A forced smile curves the usual sullen lips of the one who is most qualified for the position of Maou not only in looks but probably in intelligence as well. Woah, ultra-freebie.

"Her Majesty the Prior Maou has appointed me with the exalted duty of presenting the crown to you."

"Oh, is that all it is. I thought you were going to crash the ceremony or something. 'Cause you're strongly opposed to me being the king, aren't you?"

"I? Opposed?"

With a smile that sends shivers down my spine, he takes a step back towards me and tilts my head with a finger beneath my chin. Aah, what a complete difference in stature. But this isn't basketball or volleyball—I'm sorry to say it's not even baseball; height doesn't have anything to do with being a catcher or a king.

"That's ridiculous, why would I be opposed? I hope from the bottom of my heart for a good king."

"Good..."

"An honest, tractable, obedient king."

"So you're scheming make the king your puppet?!"

From behind Günter, who's acting like an overprotective mama towards me, Conrad says something completely carefree and unrelated. At least, that's what it sounds like.

"Speaking of which, Gwen, Anissina came."

Gwendal, who has cool for sale, instantly makes a face like he's swallowed some sort of bitter bug. Though I've never tried chewing anything like that. He clicks his tongue slightly and disappears through the door. Wow, what a surprise, so Gwendal has a weak point, too?

"Now then, Your Majesty, are you prepared? Are you nervous? Take a deep breath, inhale, exhale."

"How about you follow your own advice?"

Accompanied by Günter and Conrad, I march down the center of the great hall like I've been taught. It's covered with pure black flower petals. What a bad omen. I ascend the stone steps to the platform, where Lady Căcilie is waiting for me in sparkling golden ringlets and an alluring deep crimson dress.

"Y-you look very beautiful, Lady Căli."

Her smile fills her entire face.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. But you don't have to flatter me today of all days, since you're playing the leading part."

We're standing in the exact positions musicians would take on a live stage. There's a small artificial waterfall directly in front of the stage about the width of both arms outstretched,

and in its center is a softball-sized hole. I step onto the narrow passageway. Water falls quietly to either side.

"Now then, Your Majesty, put your right hand through the waterfall's center and listen to the Shinou's will."

"Huh? But the Shinou's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. But this hole leads to the Shinou's mausoleum, and only the one chosen to become the Maou can place his hand inside. If the Shinou approves of the new king, he will gently grip that person's hand."

"Whaat?" Even though he's supposed to be dead?!

"It's just for show," Lady Cäli whispers with her lips at my ear, "I placed my hand inside during my ceremony as well, but no one squeezed it. Leave your hand inside for a moment to emphasize the importance of the gesture, then slowly pull your hand out and raise it high. As if you have indeed received the Shinou's recognition. See, Your Majesty, there's nothing difficult about it, right?"

Günter nags from behind, "Your Majesty, please hurry."

"All right already."

I stand for a moment with my right hand raised in front of this thing that reminds me of the Bocca della Verit, the famous Italian tourist spot, and listen to the *zaa zaa* of the small waterfall.

"It won't bite my hand off if I tell a lie, will it?"

"Certainly not. It's made of very hard stone. It will not make any sudden movements."

Right, of course. I move my right hand timidly towards the dark hole and stick my index and middle fingers into it. True to expectation, pleasantly cool, moist air coils around my hand. I boldly stick the rest of my hand inside up to my elbow.

"Aaah, I'm so glad, this ceremony turned out to be nothing after all. Next I put on an important air and raise my arm..."

What the...?

My fingertips collide with something. The back of the wall, maybe?

"Your Majesty?"

Günter peers at me worriedly.

"What the...uwah, uwaugh! Something is, something's—!"

Something cold has grabbed hold of my fingers.

"S-something's grabbed me, uwah, eek, Conrad! Something's grabbed hold of me?!"

"Grabbed hold?!"

He pulls at my right hand with terrifying strength. Hey, wait a minute, he's pulling? But this is an artificial waterfall, so there should only be a wall behind the curtain of water, right?! Do you get attacked if you collide with the wall?! But then who is it pulling so hard on me from inside...?

"Dwaaap!"

With a chorus-boy scream, my face plunges into the water. Günter is desperately holding onto the back of my clothes, my left arm. Conrad seizes my belt, shouting my name. But there's a wall of water between us, and only distorted sound reaches me.

There's a wall of water, but not the wall of stone that should be there. I wheeze and gasp for air... And as I'm wheezing, suspicions begin to surface in the back of my mind. Because when I came to this world, it was through a public Western-style flush toilet. If I've bought a round-trip ticket, then I should be returning in the same way. Except that this time the water's clean—maybe that means I'm been upgraded just a bit to business class?!

I've decided to name what comes next the Star Tours.

Ya....ya...ya...

What's going on, did the sumo wrestler not show up for the tournament? Why do they keep saying 'ya'? Yariika^[1], Yankees, Yanbarukuina^[2]? Yanbarukuina, ah, that brings back memories.

The "Bold Shogun Theme" echoes at my ear—a chance for Kintetsu?—my eyes jerk open. Oh, it's just the timer going off on my blue cell phone.

"Shibuya!"

"Woah, you scared me!"

So it was the 'ya' in Shibuya. Someone shakes my shoulders, and I spring upright. The one calling my name is the Glasses-kun who was in my class in my second and third years of junior high. Who was that again? Oh, right, Ken—Murata Ken.

There's water in my nose like I've taken a gulp of water from the swimming pool. Cold, wet, heavy, stiff cloth sticks unpleasantly to my skin. I narrow my eyes against my flickering vision and look around. The dim girls' bathroom at the park: gray walls, light blue doors, an unlikely brand-name Western-style toilet behind me (and paper holder, not that it really matters). Murata Ken peering at me, and a police officer in uniform two, three steps away.

"Murata Ken...didn't you run away?"

"I wouldn't run away and leave the person who saved me behind."

The policeman asks if I'm okay, about damages and if I know the names of my attackers.

I'm thinking absentmindedly: the nighter's started.

And then I remember playing a night game with someone in a gently-lit courtyard. I remember making a promise to a kid who doesn't even know that baseball in Japanese begins with 'ya' ^[3]. I remember almost everything that happened in my dream.

"Murata...I had this really amazing dream."

"About what?"

I shake my head silently. It's a long, long story.

"Hmm, okay. Then, Shibuya, there's something I wanted to ask you about..."

When I move to stand up, a cold stone touches my skin beneath my clothes. And sparkling gold wings at the breast of my school uniform vie for my attention. I grasp the gold wings tightly with my left hand.

It wasn't a dream?

Günter, Wolfram, Gwendal, Cäli, Brandon...Conrad.

"...Was it all really a dream?"

"Eh?" Murata Ken smiles vaguely and gives me his hand. "Um, it's looks like your belt's missing...well, this is totally personal taste, so I don't want to say anything, but..."

I quickly look down at myself. My belt's been torn off, and my pants' button and zipper are both totally open. And peeking through the gap, the current height of Mazoku fashion: sexy underwear...

"Yeeargh!"

Oh no, maybe it wasn't a dream?

I guess it's not game over yet.

footnotes

[1] spear squid

[2] Okinawa rail (bird)

[3] yakyuu (野球)